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The forgotten voices: African American male adult learners and their experiences in higher education

Ajeenah H. Nuriddin-Little
Rowan University

THE FORGOTTEN VOICES: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADULT LEARNERS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Ajeenah H. Nuriddin-Little

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Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

My parents, Lana and Ronald Nuriddin, thank you for being amazing parents and role models. Thank you for instilling in me the love of learning and teaching me the value of an education.

My husband, Melvin T. Little, thank you for your constant love, sacrifice, and everything in between so I could pursue my dreams. I love you!

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Dad, your legacy continues.

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Abstract

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James Coaxum III, Ph.D.
Doctor of Education

This narrative inquiry research explored the lived experiences of six African American male adult learners enrolled at a four-year public research institution in an urban area located in the northeastern United States. The following questions guided the study: (a) How do African American male adult learners at a four-year research institution describe their experiences? (b) What environmental factors do African American male adult learners feel have shaped their academic success or non-academic success in college? (c) How does the double consciousness framework help to explain or make sense of the narrative of the African American male adult learner? This study sought to provide a more informed understanding of how African American male adult learners experience and persist toward academic success and degree attainment in higher education. The data analysis revealed five emergent themes: early education experiences, pathways to college, persistence factors: environmental challenges for African American male adult learners, and double consciousness. Results indicated that these participants' lived experiences contributed to their persistence and academic success in college.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The experiences and outcomes of African American males in higher education have garnered significant attention from researchers, educators, and administrators over the past two decades (Harper, 2014; Harper & Harris, 2012; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; Shah & Sato, 2014). The increased focus on African American males is justified given data indicating that two-thirds of African American males who begin college never complete or graduate (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006, Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). According to Strayhorn (2008), less than 5% of the 15 million students enrolled in colleges and universities today in the United States are African American males. In addition, national data signify that the number of African American men enrolled in college is the same as it was in 1976 (Palmer et al., 2014). The issues African American males face in higher education are also related to their conditions in society today, which are extensive and multifaceted (Cuyjet, 2006).

According to West (2008), African American males are disproportionately born into lives filled with obstacles, including overrepresentation in underfunded schools, high infant mortality rates, and growing up in chronic and deplorable poverty. The continuation of social ills throughout the lives of African American males indicates unique effects as they navigate adulthood (Dancy, 2012; Howard, 2013). African American males experience higher unemployment rates, overincarceration, and overrepresented health conditions more than any other racial/ethnic gender group in the United States (Howard, 2013). Additionally, race and racism have played key roles in

shaping African American males' overall experiences in society, while serving as an inhibitor to their progression and growth (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). In dealing with racism, African American males also face issues that affect them academically. According to Jackson and Moore (2006), the educational difficulties this group experiences are troubling for many higher education stakeholders.

As a result, academic scholars have responded by publishing a large number of empirical studies on African American males' experiences in higher education, retention programs, and policy reports aimed at understanding these students' narratives. According to Harper (2014), in 15 years (1997-2012), researchers published more than 60 articles in peer-reviewed academic journals on topics focused on everything from African American males' undergraduate experiences to those of more specific subgroups or institutional types, such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and community colleges (Harper, 2014). With a substantial increase in scholarly research, peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations, and books on African American males in college, educational researchers are looking to provide insight into and understanding of this population (Palmer et al., 2014). Even more, there has been an expansion of academic journals focused on this topic in recent years, such as *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men, Journal of African American Males in Education,* and *Challenge Journal: A Journal of Research on African American Men*, all of which have attempted to capture the experiences, conditions, and challenges facing African American males in postsecondary education (Palmer et al., 2014).

As scholars examine African American males' experiences in higher education, it is critical to continue to explore campus climates and this group's overall engagement on campus (Brooms, 2016, 2017, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017a; Dancy, 2012; Lewis & McKissic, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015; Wood & Williams, 2013). Investigating campus climates provides a window into the institutional factors that affect students' college experiences, including their peer-to-peer bonding in and out of class, as well as in other academic and social environments (Brooms, 2018). The difficulties facing African American males on colleges campuses today can be connected to and summed up by their positions as outsiders because of anti-Blackmaleness. The term *Blackmaleness* is defined as "the individually unique, yet collective development needs and processes by Black male learners situated within the American inopportunity-opportunity structure" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 16).

In addition, Blackmaleness is a "personal journey and social reality, tethering the life chances of Black males to an inescapable but navigable milieu of ideological, institutional, and individual inopportunity that all Black males must masterfully traverse or face the certain consequences of disenfranchisement" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 105). The impact of Blackmaleness (James & Lewis, 2014; Mutua, 2006) or the combined impact of race and gender materializes itself into racism as these young men are profiled, policed, and constantly stereotyped on campus, often at predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Brooms, 2017; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013; Smith-Allen & Danely, 2007; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Unfortunately, these experiences of racism at postsecondary institutions are often an extension of their experiences in secondary education.

Early Educational Experiences of African American Males

From childhood, African American males have often been the victims of subtle stereotypes about their cognitive abilities, overall behaviors, and life expectancies from teachers, peers, and the media (Davis, 2003). Often, these types of negative messaging translate to feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy, coupled with a perceived inability to be successful. As a result of negative messaging, African American boys are socialized under these perceptions from childhood and can develop a lack of confidence and academic ability in school, as well as a disdain for the educational environment (Baggerly & Max, 2005). Feelings of not belonging and unworthiness are compounded by the lack of diversity in classrooms, with 90% of teachers being White females (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004).

As a result, African American boys traditionally do not have the opportunity to see someone of color in an authoritative role within the secondary school setting, not to mention that the schools in which many African American boys are educated are located in urban areas with limited resources and higher numbers of uncertified teachers than their suburban colleagues (Humphrey, Koppich, & Hough, 2005). The lack of resources and teacher qualifications can significantly reduce the academic rigor and offerings available to these students.

Although African American boys comprise approximately 7% of the nation's PreK-12 student population, they also make up a disproportionate percentage of students placed in remedial classrooms or identified for special education or alternative schools (Office of Civil Rights, 2003). Moreover, African American boys are more likely to be

classified as displaying a high incidence of emotional interruptions or as having special needs with learning disabilities (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007; and Noguera, 2003.

For African American males graduating from high school, the obstacles are still present because the quality of the education they receive is typically poor when compared to their more affluent White peers (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Even more, African American males' educational experiences have a profound impact on their ability to successfully graduate high school, often manifesting in unemployment and literacy challenges (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). Schools' failures of African American males have profound implications on them in PreK-12 and higher education, but even more concerning, the failure can be directly linked to the quality of life they encounter after an unsuccessful school experience (Howard, 2008).

The secondary education system in this country continues to struggle with equalizing education for all students regardless of race. Thus, racial differences in achievement of African American and Caucasian children continue to present a complicated and disturbing social problem. According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, over the past 40 years, the gap in reading and mathematics between White children and Black children has narrowed but there remains a substantial difference between the two groups (Hedges & Nowell, 1999; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008). For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2014) indicates that in 2013, African American students generally scored 31 points lower than White students in eighth-grade math and 26 points

lower in eighth-grade reading. Scholars have offered explanations for the differences in academic performances, such as racial gaps in African American children's school readiness, which indicates that disparities outside of school play a key role (Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004).

Another academic disparity affecting African Americans, specifically African American boys, is school suspension. African American boys' rate of suspension is 2.3 times higher than that of their White peers (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000). This disparity in discipline has also been documented by the Office of Civil Rights (1993), which reported its findings from a national survey indicating that while African American males comprised 8.23% of the entire population, they were suspended at a rate over three times that percentage among the population. School factors offer one of the many reasons for these frequent suspensions. According to King (1993), school systems have a shortage of African American teachers and administrators, therefore creating a culture divide between African American students and their teachers. This shortage increases the likelihood that African Americans will be taught by teachers who have limited understanding of, knowledge about, or exposure to their own cultural backgrounds (Townsend, 2000).

For some African Americans who live in low-income cities with poor school systems, there is not an option to attend a better school in a neighboring district. Hale (2001) echoed these findings, stating that educating African Americans in second-rate schools results in substandard skills and continues the cycle of oppression for African Americans. Even more, African Americans are blamed for their own predicament instead

of focusing on racism, which serves as a culprit preventing African American males from achieving excellence comparable to that of their White peers (Hale, 2001). In the same manner, racism is manifested consistently in America's public institutions, including in education. Even outside these public institutions, African American boys are faced with the harsh reality of the media's depiction of them. In a discussion of the "U.S. love-hate relationship with African American males" (p. 8), Ladson-Billings (2011) stated,

> We see Black males as "problems" that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. We seem to hate their dress, their language, and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots – music, basketball, football, track – we seem less comfortable with them in places like the National Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. (p. 9)

According to Hopkins (1997), Black male students at K-12 institutions experience cultural, political, and economic inequalities practically every day. Additionally, according to White and Cones (1999), in most inner-city high schools, Black males dropout rate is over 50%. Previous research outcomes validate this claim that Black students attending PWIs experience microaggressions that hinder their success (Allen, 1992; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984). To this end, it is critical to explore the experiences of African American males in higher education. The educational challenges these men experience in elementary and secondary education are not exclusive to the K-12 system, as they are also prevalent in postsecondary education.

African American Males in Postsecondary Education

The low expectations for academic success African American males encounter from their PreK-12 teachers follow them into college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). As a result, African American males find themselves overwhelmed by the academic rigor of college and unable to meet professors' expectations due to a lack of academic preparation (Harper, 2009). Additionally, various factors affect the quality of these students' experiences in college, including race. Allen's (1992) national study of 1,800 Black students (872 attending PWIs and 928 attending HBCUs) explored how students' campus experiences (racial makeup), personalities, and backgrounds were associated with outcomes connected to academic achievement, occupational goals, and social involvement. This quantitative, multivariate study found that a mixture of individual and institutional characteristics served as a major indicator of students' social engagement, academic achievement, and occupational goals. In addition, the study suggests that students' response to and understanding of the stressors associated with institutional settings determined their levels of success, emphasizing the point that students attending HBCUs outgained that of their peers who attended PWIs (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Moreover, African American males comprise 41% of students ages 18-54 enrolled in community colleges (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), while at HBCUs, African American males account for 38.5% of the population (NCES, 2017). Although enrollment numbers at community colleges and HBCUs are close, Bush and Bush (2010) found that community colleges continue to serve as the primary pathway to educational success for African American males. However, the U.S. Department of Education

(USDOE; 2009) indicated that 11.5% of African American males leave community colleges without degrees after their first year, 48.9% leave by the third year, and 83% leave by the fifth year. Enrollment by African American males are considerably low, comprising only 14% of the entire population (NCES, 2013), the result of their negative experiences at PWIs, as well as a lack of support from institutions (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2009).

Despite the various institutional options available to African American males, researchers continue to explore why there is a lower number of African American males currently enrolled in college (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). According to several scholars (Harper, 2006, 2012; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010), African American males comprise 4.3% of total student enrollment at four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States. Based on national data, African American males are less likely to enroll and attend college due to access, affordability, and attainment (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2014). Although 28.5% of African American males select a public four-year college or university, an overwhelming 70.5% select community colleges or two-year universities (Wood & Harrison, 2014). According to Bush (2004), African American males often attend community college with the understanding that it will lead to economic and social advancement. They also believe community colleges offer their sole opportunity to earn a postsecondary degree, given the affordability (Bush & Bush, 2004, 2005). Regardless of institutional type, however, many African American males are not academically prepared to attend college. According to Jones and Assalong (2016), more than half (56%) of African American students attending

college are faced with the conundrum of being accepted at an institution but being labeled as "unprepared" for college-level instruction.

Educational Challenges for African American Males

The low expectations for academic success African American males encounter from their PreK-12 teachers follow them into college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). As a result, African American males find themselves overwhelmed by the academic rigor of college and unable to meet professors' expectations due to a lack of academic preparation (Harper, 2009). Regardless of the obstacles facing these students, they continue to pursue a college degree as they attend various types of institutions, including community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs. Community colleges serve as one option with a rich history of access, opportunity, and inclusion of all students, including veterans; first-generation, low-income, and minority students; and adult learners (Culp & Dungy, 2014). Community colleges' mission is to provide postsecondary education opportunities to all individuals who can truly benefit from it (Culp & Dungy, 2014).

The disparities African American males face result in a lack of preparation for college, also known as "under-preparedness," according to Cuyjet (1997). This lack of preparedness for college work emerges early in African American males' educational careers. They are provided with less-than-adequate academic resources in K-12 years due to poor schooling and discriminatory practices such as tracking and placing Black boys into behavior disorder classes in higher numbers compared to the total school population (Jaschik, 2006). According to Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009), systemic racism is embedded in many public institutions, including education, which can have a negative

impact on African American male students. In addition to poor schooling and discriminatory practices, further evidence supporting the claim that African American males are under-prepared includes the enrollment difference between African American males and females, with African American females representing 24% higher enrollment than their male peers (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

According to Robinson (2000), a lack of academic preparedness for college is often a result of discrimination that occurs throughout the educational pipeline. The impact of under-preparedness for African American males is significant, with 44% being classified as functionally illiterate (Blake & Darling, 1994), which subsequently affects every facet of their lives, making them predisposed to limited employment opportunities, lower wages, poor health, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007). For many African American students who graduate from secondary education and are not adequately prepared, the transition to college begins with the least-desirable college track through developmental education (Jones & Assalong, 2016). These developmental education courses are designed for students who have not met a college's minimal requirements in standardized test and placement scores (Preston, 2017). Unlike college-level courses, these courses are not credit-bearing, but students are required to enroll and pay for them although they do not count toward a degree (Jones & Assalong, 2016). According to Complete College American (2016), African American males are more likely than other students to be required to complete developmental education courses at two- and four-year institutions.

Equally important to low enrollment, completion, and under-prepardness is the issue of persistence for African American males in higher education (Bush & Bush, 2005). According to Harper's (2012) 50-state report card study of colleges and universities, within college cohorts from 2001 to 2004 in Michigan, African American men completed a bachelor's degree at a rate of 17% lower than the overall student population. As a result, the rate of degree completion for African American males was, and remains, the lowest among all students. In addition, the six-year graduation rate for African American males attending public colleges and universities (with a starting cohort of 2008) was 35.4% for African American males, compared to 58.2% for White males, 47.3% for Hispanic males, 65.6% for Asian/Pacific Islander males, and 37.9% for American Indian/Alaska Native males across four cohorts of undergraduate students (USDOE, 2016). For many African American students attending PWIs, constant encounters with microaggressions and lack of support can impede overall success (Allen, 1992). Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) echoed the notion that many studies conducted on the persistence of African American males at PWIs focuses on their negative experiences and the impact of racial battleground fatigue.

In Bridges' (2010) study, African American male students attending a southeastern PWI practiced psychological distancing to contend with the discriminatory practices occurring on campus known to hinder overall success. More specifically, six participants in three focus groups disclosed that they considered the campus unwelcoming to African American students, given its history of significant racial tensions (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). These campus experiences affected students' outlook on the

campus and connectedness to their educational pursuits. According to Patton (2016), African American students experience regular loneliness and microaggressions on campus, such as being singled out in the classroom for the minority viewpoint, being viewed as the affirmative action-admitted student, or seeing minimal representation of personal identified culture on campus. These experiences can adversely affect the African American male attending a PWI.

This study examined the extent to which race affects the under-preparedness, low enrollment numbers, and low completion rates of African American male collegians. Academic scholars have produced an abundance of literature on traditional African American male college students' experiences but have yet to explore these students' experiences as adult learners. Given the changing landscape of college campuses, the classroom continues to expand, with adult learners representing 47% of students enrolled in college and universities today. Thus, it is imperative for higher education administrators to understand this population better (Pelletier, 2010). Adult education scholars agree that critical assessment of institutional practices fosters a greater sense of the awareness and understanding needed to better support these students (Drayton, Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, & Guy, 2014). Drayton et al. (2014) echoed these thoughts, stating that many of the issues facing African American males in college are exacerbated by racism. According to Steele (1992), it is a persistent reality in any desegregated educational institution in America today that Blacks and White live in separate worlds. The differences, obvious in academic performance levels between Black and White

students, can be attributed to the weaknesses in Black students' personal and academic orientations to college (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996).

Statement of Problem

Scholars have provided empirical insight into the access, equity, and campus climate challenges traditional African American males face on PWI campuses where they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2015). However, the plight of the African American male as an adult learner has not been captured in the literature (Guy, 2014). Adult learners are identified as college students 25 years and older (Cross, 1981). Similar to African American male collegians, the African American male adult learner's plight includes a constant uphill battle against racism, policing, and negative perceptions in both educational settings and everyday experiences. To illustrate this plight, Guy (2014) utilized a metaphor to describe African American males in education and society as comparable to salmon racing upstream against a current despite the life-threatening hurdles and predators. This metaphor can be applied to how researchers have traditionally examined African American males' experiences in adult education (Goings, 2017).

The adult learner or nontraditional student comprises one of the fastest growing populations in higher education. Life experiences for adult learners often consist of being employed full-time, having dependents, being single parents, being financially independent, attending school part-time, possessing a high-school diploma, or delaying entrance to college by one year following high school (Choy, 2002). Along with personal development, these factors indicate drastic differences between traditional students and adult learners. To this end, scholarly research has been conducted on the reentry of

African American male adult learners and the barriers they face in their pursuit of higher education (Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014).

For example, Rosser-Mims et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study to examine African American male adult learners' reentry to college. Findings indicated barriers to reentry included financial resources and a struggle to pay for college, a lack of role models in their lives, and the uncertainty of handling work-life balance. Participants also identified family and children as sources of support, as well as the intrinsic motivation to improve themselves professionally and personally (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). Similarly, Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) conducted a qualitative study on keys to college success identified by African American adult students returning to college. Findings indicated that adult learner participants identified their immaturity, sense of career trajectory, and strong desire for real-world experience as reasons they had not succeeded in college during their initial attempts. Although the study's participants overcame various obstacles and found success in college, they also mentioned that race and gender biases served as barriers in their interactions with faculty (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Although these studies explored African American adult learners and identified barriers to their reentering college, very few strands of research have focused specifically on the experiences of African American males as adult learners attending PWIs.

Both traditional African American male college students and African American male adult learners have experienced racial barriers, but scholarly research has yet to examine the intersection between African American males as adult learners and their

overall experiences in higher education. Additional barriers facing adult learners include situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. According to Cross (1981), situational barriers are those that arise during one's current situation in life, including financial and home responsibilities; dispositional barriers include attitudes, beliefs, and self-perceptions as a learner; and institutional barriers include practices and processes that discourage adult learners from taking part in learning activities.

Similar barriers have been identified for traditional African American male college students and include financial resources, academic readiness, and the challenges of balancing school and work (Dulabham, 2016). Though barriers for these student populations have been explored separately, scholars have not explored the intersection of African American males and adult learners. The need to examine the African American male adult learner intersection is critical to adult educators and higher education administrators. According to Pusser et al., (2007), "adult learners have typically been treated as an afterthought in higher education" (p. 3). As a result, there is limited and outdated knowledge around this population's needs and institutions are not prepared to meet or support those needs (Aslanian, 2001; Cuyjet, 2006, Ross-Gordon, 2005). Therefore, the intersection between the adult learner who is considered an afterthought and the African American male who is considered an outsider needs to be examined.

Purpose of the Study

There is a significant gap in the literature that explains how African American male adult learners experience and persist toward academic success and degree

attainment in higher education. While scholars have focused on adult learners, there has been limited research on nontraditional Black male undergraduates (Goings, 2015a). As a result, studies are needed to understand further the experiences of African American male adult learners at a four-year research institution. Additionally, few studies have examined the African American male adult learner through a double-consciousness lens. Double consciousness is the understanding of oneself and the understanding of one's surrounding (Du Bois, 1969. For African American males, double consciousness is related to understanding one's heritage within one's environment while simultaneously understanding the exterior environment (Du Bois, 1903).

Given the racial barriers identified for both African American males and African American male adult learners, this study utilized double consciousness as a component of the conceptual framework. According to Du Bois (1989), this concept offers an internal approach through which an individual perceives oneself through the eyes of others. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois expresses the Black male voice and the struggles focused on racial tension:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 45)

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the narrative about double consciousness derives from the experiences of African American males as adult learners attending a PWI. It is important for current adult educators and higher education administrators to understand this population better to develop more effective programs and strategies for student success.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of African American male adult learners pursuing a bachelor's degree at a four-year research institution. The narrative of African American male experiences is grounded in the overarching stereotypes that directly affect how they may be treated or perceived by others, which can also directly influence their educational choices (Drayton et al., 2014). To this end, focusing on these students' experiences in higher education, the research sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do African American male adult learners at a four-year public research institution describe their experiences?

RQ2: What environmental factors do African American male adult learners feel have shaped their academic success or non-academic success in college?

RQ3: How does the double-consciousness framework help to explain or make sense of the narrative of African American male adult learners?

Significance of the Study

This study's significance is that it sheds light on the experiences of African American male adult learners enrolled at a four-year public research institution. This study begins to fill in the gaps in knowledge about these students' experiences and the

environmental factors that have shaped those experiences. The study's findings provide information for understanding the experiences of African American male adult learners that is currently not available. This study is also useful to scholars; higher education practitioners; and college and university presidents, faculty, deans, and administrators in developing institutional environments that are beneficial to African American male adult students' success.

This study also benefits adult educators. National data predict that enrollment of students ages 25 and older will continue to increase faster than enrollment for traditional-aged college students (Gast, 2013; Grummon, 2009; Hauptman, 2008; Collins, 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2010). With an increase of adult learners on campus, it is imperative for higher education institutions to begin examining African American male adult learners' experiences and the factors influencing their academic choices in higher education.

For many adult learners, returning to school is necessary to stay competitive in the workplace. To this end, providing a voice for this student population is critical to the breadth and depth of adult learning. According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), "since participation in adult education is largely a voluntary activity, knowing who is participating, reasons for participating, and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation can help providers better serve adult learners" (p. 53). Similarly, sharing these learners' experiences provides insight into potential challenges they may face. As a result, this study can assist higher education professionals in developing more

comprehensive programs and strategies to support these learners while contributing to the body of knowledge.

Research Design and Strategy of Inquiry

This study utilized a qualitative research method design that Merriam (2009) explained as understanding the wholeness of the social phenomenon and a philosophical approach to the study of experience. The purpose of qualitative research is to better understand and illustrate human behavior (William & Morrow, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), it is developed from the social constructionist perspective, a phenomenon guided by the philosophical assumptions of qualitative inquiry. In using this design, researchers attempt to uncover and understand an occurrence or event, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of participants.

This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach to better understand the experiences of African American male adult learners. This design gave the researcher an opportunity to gather and examine personal stories and experiences communicated the words and perceptions participants used to describe their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Livholts & Tamboukov, 2015). The data-collection method for this study consisted of a two-tiered interview approach, including semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions, as well as follow-up interviews. Semi-structured interviews gave participants the opportunity to respond in their own voices with the potential for raising new ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach was identified with the goal of gathering information critical to addressing the research questions. Follow-up was also critical to this research effort because it improved its overall effectiveness

(Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In addition, field notes were used to capture each participant's setting and environment. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Rossman and Rallis (2012), field notes provide another viewpoint for describing and understanding each participant's full experience and interview. The researcher also used a journal to capture participants' reactions and feelings.

Conceptual Framework

After thoroughly reviewing theories related to adult learners and African American males, I realized existing theories were limited in their scope when considering both the African American male as an adult learner and the variables impacting their college experience. Adult learners struggle to balance their academic endeavors with the challenges of family commitments, work obligations, and financial responsibilities. Equally important, adult learners' ability to overcome these obstacles is critical to their persistence in college. The framework for this study began with an examination of Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student persistence, which identifies the nontraditional student as being older than the traditional student, enrolled part-time, and a commuter. Given these traits, nontraditional students are more impacted by the external environment and the variables that pull this population away from their collegiate experience (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These environmental variables outside the institution, including financial challenges, work, and family, have a direct impact on the persistence of nontraditional students and an indirect effect on persistence via psychological variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner's (1985) study of nontraditional students influenced Wood and Williams' (2013) study on Black males enrolled in community colleges, which also examined persistence but focused solely on factors related to or predictive of Black male persistence in that setting. It is critical to note that the age range of African American males attending community college includes students ages 18-54 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although this study focused on the African American males enrolled in community colleges, it is one of the few studies that provides insight into the factors impacting African American males who are also adult learners. Factors for this study were divided into the following five constructs: 1) background/defining variables, 2) academic variables, 3) environmental variables, 4) institutional variables, and 5) psychological variables.

Simultaneously, Cross (1981) identified similar factors identified as barriers to adult learner participation in learning activities, including institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers. Both studies identified similar factors and/or barriers impacting the African American male and the adult learner. Thus, the present study examined the intersecting factors and barriers identified in both studies as the conceptual framework. In addition, double consciousness served as a component within the conceptual framework because it assisted me in illustrating African American males' experiences.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American male adult learners enrolled in a four-year public research institution, as well as the external factors that may affect their academic success in higher education. An overview

of African American males in higher education was discussed, in addition to academic challenges including their low enrollment, completion, under-preparedness, and persistence. This study's conceptual framework consisted of factors impacting African American males according to Wood and Williams (2013), barriers impacting adult learners (Cross, 1981), and the role of double consciousness. In Chapter 2, I synthesize the literature surrounding African American males' successes and challenges, including under-preparedness, low enrollment, and persistence. In addition, a review of adult learners and barriers to success was reviewed, with a specific focus on African American males. Given the rapidly growing population of adult learners, it is critically important to connect how African American male adult learners experience college.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The African American community has long valued education and opportunities for advancement (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). For African American males pursuing a college degree, the main goal has been to improve economic and social standing (Bush & Bush, 201). However, enrollment data indicate African American males are underrepresented across the higher education spectrum (Harper & Harris, 2012). According to the USDOE (2010), there was a small increase (4%) in African American male student enrollment between 1980 and 2010. Despite this minimal increase over a 30-year period, African American males are proportionately lower compared to their White male students across all degree levels. The enrollment number is even lower for African American males who begin their educational careers at four-year colleges and universities (Strayhorn, 2017).

Given the underrepresentation of African American males in higher education, it makes sense for educators and researchers to study this population to learn more about the influences and experiences that have caused them to drop out or discontinue their pursuit of a college degree. Harper (2012) argued that research findings related to retention of students overall cannot be used to develop generic retention practices that successfully impact all student groups, Black males in particular. According to Harper (2012), the best way to successfully address Black male college attainment is to understand their lived experiences. The first step in understanding these experiences begins when they are in secondary school.

The review of literature for this study begins with an examination of African American males in higher education and the challenges they experienced with early education, low enrollment, and persistence. The literature review then highlights African American males as adult learners and the distinctive traits of adult learners in college. The review further examines relevant variables impacting African American male adult learners, including common challenges facing both African American males and adult learners. This chapter concludes with the conceptual framework of intersecting factors and barriers impacting African American males and adult learners, viewing these experiences through the ideological lens of double consciousness.

Early Education of African American Males

According to scholars, beginning with early childhood education, African American boys experience subtle stereotypical messages from the media, teachers, and peers regarding their cognitive abilities, behaviors, and overall life expectations (Palmer et al., 2014). The messages they receive early on undoubtedly socialize them into disbelieving their own worth and ability to succeed, while creating an unwelcoming classroom environment (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2013). The overabundance of publications on Black male underachievement and hopelessness highlights the poorly resourced and culturally unaware K-12 school system (Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2008). According to Harper (2009),

> Anyone who takes time to read about them could confidently conclude that Black male undergraduates are troubled, their future is bleak, they all are poor, and there

> is little that can be done to reverse longstanding outcomes of disparities that render them among the least likely to succeed in college. (pp. 699-700)

According to Kunjufu (1995), Black boys stop caring about school toward the conclusion of elementary school. Teachers begin to reduce their efforts in nurturing and promoting achievement among Black males by the fourth grade, thus creating an environment of disengagement and interest (Harper & Davis, 2012). According to Kunjufu (1995), who visited classrooms over an eight-year period and observed these nuances, African American male teachers are missing from the classroom. During these visits, Kunjufu (1995) found that White teachers used teaching methods that failed to engage enthusiasm for learning among Black boys and most curriculum was non-Afrocentric.

African American males have similar experiences as they move through to high school. For example, according to Palmer et al.'s (2013) study of Black male high school students, one of the many reasons African American boys lack a sense of belonging in the classroom is the absence of "skilled and culturally component teachers" (p. 291). According to some participants in Palmer et al.'s (2013) study, they would have been better prepared to go to and succeed in college if they had encountered more African American male teachers in their classrooms. Although the participants had already been accepted to college, it is important to understand their perspectives and experiences.

It is also important to note that 90% of PreK teachers are Caucasian, and a large majority of those teachers are women (Palmer et al., 2014). These students do not have the opportunity to learn from someone of the same race or gender who may serve as an

authority figure in their lives. According to Palmer et al.'s (2013, 2014) studies, African American male teachers utilize culturally relevant pedagogical practices in their classrooms. Aside from the shortage of teachers with whom African American boys share a common racial/ethnic identity, many teachers of students who reside in urban communities are unqualified or lack appropriate certification (Palmer et al., 2013, 2014).

In addition to the shortage of teachers, African American boys have to contend with low performance expectations from educators. According to Museus, Harper, and Nichols (2010), "it has also been noted that teachers hold significantly higher expectations for Asian and White students than for their Black peers" (p. 818). Unfortunately, low performance expectations continue through the postsecondary level. The damage of low expectations places African American males at a disadvantage based on assumptions, rather than facts, about their performance (Allen, 1992; Harper et al., 2009; Museus et al., 2010). Consequently, low expectations translate to how they are addressed in school.

Likewise, African American boys make up an overwhelming number of students placed in special education or classified with learning disabilities (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003). It is taken almost as a statement of fact that Black men and boys simply cannot perform as well as other students. Based on these variables, African American males often are not properly prepared to take on the rigors of college. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (2015), 17% of African Americans entering college are not academically prepared for the overall rigor. This lack

of preparedness for college serves as one of the many reasons for low college enrollment among African American males today.

Low Enrollment of African American Males in Postsecondary Education

African American males' enrollment in college is a concern for many higher education stakeholders. According to Weaver-Hightower (2009), African American males enroll at a lower rate than their non-African American peers because of insufficient educational pipelines at the secondary level. One factor impacting this insufficiency is the overrepresentation of African American males in suspension and expulsion rates as compared to their White peers (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Jones, 2001). The overemphasis of discipline and the actions taken against African American boys can affect school readiness and contribute to a larger problem related to the school-to-prison pipeline for many African American boys (Rashid, 2009).

By the time African American boys get to high school, they experience major challenges taking and passing college preparatory classes and graduating high school (Weaver-Hightower, 2009). For example, research demonstrates that since the 1990s, female students have been traditionally less likely than males to drop out of high school (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Schwed, 2011). By 2005, roughly 11% of males aged 16-24 had dropped out, compared to 8% of females (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). Additionally, male high school graduates are more likely to have completed their high school requirements with a GED, which reduces opportunities for career and educational prospects compared to those who have earned a high school diploma (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Mishel & Roy, 2006). As a result, in general females are more likely to

enroll in and attend a four-year college than their male counterparts (McDaniel et al., 2011).

The ever-widening gender gap between African American males and females is also important to African American males' postsecondary enrollment dilemma. There has been a significant increase in the college enrollment of African Americans over the last 20 years, but that spike is due primarily to a significant increase in the number of African American women enrolled in college (Garibaldi, 1997). According to the NCES (2016), in 1990 there was a 22% gap between African American female and male enrollments, 61% of African American females were enrolled as undergraduates, compared to 39% of African American males. Moreover, the USDOE (2010) affirmed these findings, demonstrating that African American women surpassed their same-race counterparts in degree attainment at every level, including associates, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

These statistics are also true for college completion rates in the United States among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups, with African American males demonstrating the lowest completion rate (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). As a result, African American women are making strides toward postsecondary education with a 45% completion rate, compared to a 35% completion rate for African American males (NCES, 2016).

Persistence of African American Males in Postsecondary Education

Students can choose from several pathways to complete a postsecondary degree (McDaniel et al., 2011). Many students seeking a college degree have not taken the

necessary steps to prepare for college or have not received the proper tools and resources to be successful in college. After completing high school or earning a GED, students must apply and be admitted to college, matriculate from year to year, and graduate (McDaniel et al., 2011).

The college selection process can also serve as a factor that affects students' continued persistence and college experience (Walpole, 2008). Students who perform at a higher level academically in high school and take college preparatory classes are more likely than their peers to graduate from college (Ewert, 2012). Some external factors impact persistence, including family support and encouragement, social involvement, and overall college experiences (Ewert, 2012). For African Americans who possess intrinsic motivation, the internal drive propels them toward academic and social success in college (Wright, 2009).

For many African American males attending college, challenges to persistence can include internal institutional factors, personal factors, and external or environmental factors. Nathan (2008) explored personal factors in a study and found that they may contribute to academic success for African American males. This study's findings indicated that extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics contributed to college persistence and overall success (Nathan, 2008). More specifically, relationships between friends and family and overall college experiences assisted in these students' retention and persistence (Nathan, 2008). Regardless of internal and external personal factors, however, students' experiences while actively enrolled in college ultimately shape the likelihood

that they will complete their degree by cultivating a commitment to graduate (Ewert, 2012).

Cross and Astin (1981) conducted a two-year longitudinal study of factors that influenced persistence among 16,657 Black and White students enrolled at various colleges and universities. Their intention was to explore the impact of race, institutional type, and financial access on college persistence, and the results indicated that Black students' pre-collegiate history and involvement in campus life, as well as the university's racial composition, predicted persistence. As a result, higher grades in high school and SAT scores, increased social interactions, and a greater prevalence of Blacks on campus positively impacted persistence rates. In addition, persistence was negatively affected by the various levels of financial borrowing and debt.

One external factor that plays a significant role in African American males' lives is racial stereotyping and racism. According to Allen (1992), African American males attending PWIs are faced with racial stereotypes and microaggressions that impede their academic progress and overall persistence. African American males at PWIs experience stereotype threat, which is the "threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele, 1999, p. 46). This type of threat can negatively influence African American males' academic achievement.

Conversely, African American males attending HBCUs also experience persistence challenges. Despite the cultural connections and engagements African American males experience at HBCUs, their degree attainment is 29%, compared to 57%

for female students enrolled in HBCUs (Palmer & Wood, 2012). Even more, African American male attainment has declined by 6% in a single decade (1997-2007) (Palmer & Wood, 2012). One structure critical to African American male college students' success is family support. According to Cuyjet (2006) and Hampton (2002), family serves as a key source of support for African American men in college. According to Flowers' (2012) qualitative case study of senior engineering students enrolled at an HBCU, students' strong level of self-efficacy was due to faculty members' and institutions' influential roles. The findings also indicated the important role of family as a major resource for students (Flowers, 2012).

Student retention and persistence is a major concern for higher education policy makers, as it serves as an indicator of institutional effectiveness (Tinto, 2016). According to Seidman (2005), student retention is drastically impacted and worsens when the intersectionality of race, first-generation status, and socioeconomic status is considered. The reasons students do not persist and depart from college are multifaceted and include personal reasons and factors such as institutional fit (Bean, 1990; Cabrera, Castenada, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Johnson, 2009; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999). Some of the most common reasons for students' departures include pre-college academic experiences, student background characteristics, institutional characteristics (including institution size), distance from home, and lack of faculty and staff engagement. Some studies have identified race as a significant predictor of success (Astin, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckely, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Muntaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Peltier et al., 1999).

Racial Challenges

Unfortunately, African American males' racial experiences at PWIs are not new, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), whose 20-year synopsis on college students suggested, "It is equally clear that the academic, social, and psychological worlds inhabited by most nonwhite students on predominantly white campuses are substantially different in almost every respect from those of their white peers" (p. 644). The classroom also serves as a racially hostile environment for African American males; Davis et al.'s (2004) study of African American males' experiences at a PWI in the southeastern United States indicated that White professors perceive these students to be inferior. This study provides additional examples of the stereotypes participating students had experienced, including one participant disclosing that a professor immediately assumed he or she did not meet the academic qualifications to compete for a departmental scholarship despite the fact s/he had a 4.0 GPA (Davis et al., 2004). Additionally, participants disclosed that they felt invisible among their White peers in study groups because it was assumed that African American students did not know enough about the topic to contribute (Davis et al., 2004).

In addition, many PWIs' academic environments foster a level of competitiveness that might become another challenge posing a serious threat to African American males' academic success (Palmer et al., 2014). According to Bonner and Bailey (2006), once African American males acclimate to an institution and its environment, they find themselves challenged by the ruthless and competitive nature that institution cultivates. As a result, these students are less likely to perform at an optimal level and

engage with their peers. According to Strayhorn (2008), sense of belonging is contingent upon one's interaction with peers from varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, according to Harper and colleagues (2011),

> The belongingness of Black men is constantly threatened by the reinforcement or racist stereotypes that stigmatize them as unqualified admits who gained access to the institution through affirmative action or participation on an intercollegiate sports steam, underprepared "at-risk" students who all emerged from low-income families and when ghettos, and dangerous thugs from the local community who pose a security threat to the campus. (p. 180)

These stereotypes of African American males can pose a serious threat to their overall academic achievement at PWIs, according to Harper and Kuykendall (2012) and Strayhorn (2008). Harper (2011) interviewed 52 African American male resident assistants attending PWIs, and they reported experiencing psychological stress from racial stereotypes and microaggressions, which subsequently impacted their desire to participate in on-campus activities.

Deficit thinking. Barriers affecting the persistence of African Americans males in higher education often include a deficit thinking approach that affects the treatment of this population in society and their portrayal in scholarly literature (Harper, 2009). According to Fries-Britt (1997),

> The images created of Black men in society often confine them to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. In education, we have

> contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amount of research that emphasizes remediation and disadvantage. (p. 65)

Harper (2009) echoed this conclusion, stating examples of successful African American males and their lived experiences are traditionally "overshadowed by the master narrative that amplifies Black male underachievement, disengagement, and attrition" (p. 708). Deficit thinking impacts the ways African American males are portrayed in the media, as well as how they are treated at institutions of higher education (Goings, 2016). Coupled with deficit thinking, racial microaggressions (subtle racial slights) also impact African American males and how they encounter, acclimate to, and engage with educational institutions (Ingram, 2013). According to Harper (2015) and McGee and Martin (2011), African American men, particularly those at PWIs, are exposed to stereotyping, racism, and uninviting campus environments.

Given the social and cultural background differences, African American males have different experiences in college than their non-African American peers. According to Strayhorn (2010), African American males who attend PWIs perceive their environments to be unsupportive and unsympathetic. These students' experiences are a major area of interest for scholars focused on the equity and inclusion of ethnic minorities in society. As scholars look to address issues of equity and inclusion, one segment missing from the population is research on the African American male college student who is also an adult learner. It is critically important to capture their expereinces at four-year institutions.

The Adult Learner in Higher Education

Adult learners are the fastest growing population of students on college campuses today (Bonner, Marbley, Evans, & Robinson, 2015). They are identified based on distinct traits, including dependent support (either married or single parent status), full-time employment with part-time enrollment status, awareness of work-life experiences, and time limitations (NCES, 2002; Ritt, 2008). With a changing economy, many adults have been forced to reexamine their job security, professional skillset, and overall marketability. Others pursue higher education with aspirations for upward mobility and growth and may be dissatisfied with their positions in life (Kasworm, 2003a, 2003b; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Stevens, 2014). As a result, many adult learners attend postsecondary institutions to expand their knowledge base and build their skillset to improve their opportunities for employment and promotions.

Given the significant number of adult learners enrolled in colleges and universities, former President Barack Obama created an initiative to increase degree attainment in the U.S. While serving as the leader of the free world, President Obama established a higher education goal of producing the highest proportion of college degrees obtained in the world by the year 2020. In order to reach this goal, eight million more adults needed to earn a college degree (USDOE, 2011). According to the Pew Research Center (2017), strides had been made toward this goal, with 45% of adult learners ages 25-34 earning at least an associate's degree as of 2015. By 2016, 55% of Caucasian adult learners ages 25-34 had attained an associate's degree, compared to 35% of African American and 26% of Hispanic adult learners (Graf, 2017). As of President

Obama's departure from the White House in January 2017, the goal had not been met. Nevertheless, adult learners continue to comprise a significant portion of enrollment on college campuses today. Thus, it is imperative to examine African American male adult learners' experiences in higher education.

Additional efforts to encourage adult learners to pursue postsecondary degrees have been reaffirmed by higher education institutions that offer online and accelerated degree programs. Although many institutions attract and engage learners this way, they overlook the opportunity to fully develop these students as adult learners (Stevens, 2014). Adult learners possess unique experiences, needs, and desires compared to their traditional counterparts. According to Kasworm (1990), these unique needs include significant family responsibilities, work, and financial obligations that complicate their lives. Since these life stressors and educational needs differ considerably from those of younger traditional students, all areas of the college environment must be taken into consideration when supporting a growing adult student population (Graham & Donaldson, 1999).

Reasons Adult Learners Pursue Postsecondary Education

To effectively address adult learners' needs, higher education institutions must first understand the reasons adults pursue college degrees. For many adult learners, pursuing a degree is in direct response to changes within the workforce, as well as life-changing events such as loss of a spouse or divorce (Cross, 1981; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Kasworm, 2003b). In addition, Quinnan (1997) reported that adults pursue college degrees due to economic security and/or life-changing events. Cross (1981) agreed,

stating that adult learners traditionally pursue learning in response to a major life transition, such as having children, getting married, obtaining a first job, making a career change, and retiring. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) echoed these thoughts, adding that global competition and veterans returning from war could also encourage adult learners to pursue a college degree.

Upon returning to college, adult learners' challenges are vastly different from traditionally aged college students; as a result, they are less likely to finish their courses or areas of study (Pusser et al., 2007). Terrell (1990) discussed seven developmental needs of adult learners, including being goal-oriented but possessing low self-concept, facing time and other overall emotional demands, establishing financial stability, meeting work demands and civic obligations, serving as a family caretaker and developing family relationships, examining career choices, and revisiting areas of interest and habits (Terrell, 1990). On the contrary, traditional students do not possess these types of needs. The diversity of classrooms and thoughts between these types of students can also pose challenges on campus. According to Kasworm (2003b), the differences between traditionally aged students and adult learners is vast, but higher education must create a "helpful, supportive environment for their future success" (p. 9). Additionally, adult learners can construct their learning and knowledge around their life experiences, including personal and family obligations (Kasworm, 2003b).

Adults pursue college degrees for various reasons, one of which is the possibility of a career change. Many adult learners identified as the aging baby boomer generation pursue career changes as they enter retirement. According to Freedman (2007), more

recently, adults entering retirement age have been returning to college campuses to pursue a degree that serves as a catalyst for their "encore careers," which are usually pursued during the second half of an individual's working life and can be more fulfilling than their first careers. The encore career is pursued primarily by a group Freedman (2007) identified as the "gray wave," members of the baby boomer generation that are currently at or approaching retirement age. Ironically, baby boomers are the same demographic group Cross (1981) referred to when she claimed,

> There is no reason to believe that the influence of America's largest generation will subside in the future. Should we expect an "adult revolution" within the next two decades comparable to the youth revolution of the 1960s? If so, how will it affect education? (p. 7)

These words foretold the gray wave taking on higher education in pursuit of encore careers, just as Bank (2007) and Freedman (2007) indicated.

Another reason adult learners return to college is economic conditions and global competition. Globalization is the movement of services, goods, people, and ideas internationally (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The growth of globalization today compared to 20 years ago is marked by greater intensity and speed (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Today, globalization refers to the outsourcing of goods and services, including manufacturing in low-wage and low-income countries (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). With the growth of technology, globalization is not only an industry for goods and services; it has also become an industry in which information and ideas are shared across the globe. Pursuing a college degree allows adult learners to remain competitive, according to

Rhoads and Liu (2009), who stated, “The growing influence of knowledge-oriented global economy raises the states for universities, given their role in the producing and commodification of knowledge” (p. 305). The competition for jobs drives many adult learners to pursue college degrees so they can improve their marketability, income standing, and career potential (Carnevale et al., 2012; Kasworm, 2003b; Tikkanen, 1998).

One final reason adults return to college is life changes and transitions. Some of these changes can include experiencing divorce, death of a spouse, or becoming an “empty nester” (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2003b). Children can also serve as a source of motivation for adult learners to attend college and as a reminder of the need to develop skills to place the family in a better financial place (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Adult learners are motivated to pursue a college degree after realizing they missed out on many opportunities when they were younger because they did not have the appropriate credentials. Regardless of their reason to pursue a college degree, adult learners are focused on their educational goals.

Barriers for Adult Learners

Despite the desire or motivation to pursue a college degree, many adult learners are competing with other commitments, including caring for family, maintaining full-time employment, having dependents other than a spouse, being single parents, fulfilling financial obligations, and not obtaining a traditional high school diploma (Deggs, 2011). Often, these challenges serve as obstacles or barriers to persistence and completion. According to Flint (2000), adult learners have a unique set of needs, particularly if they are employed while pursuing a college degree. In addition to these unique qualities, adult

learners' life experiences serve as critical foundations for success (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Research recently published by the Lumina Foundation for Education identified specific characteristics of adult learners based on findings from their Emerging Pathways project. The following four lessons regarding adult learners in higher education emerged from the research: (a) the idea of a typical adult learner is nonexistent; (b) there is poor understanding around adult learning, specifically online, on campus, short-term, and non-credit courses; (c) the traditional path will not work for many adult learners; and (d) in order to determine the right approach, adult learners need a guide (Pusser et al., 2007). Moreover, adult learners are not homogenous, unlike traditional college-aged students; they differ in family life, career experiences, and educational background (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). These challenges can serve as barriers to completion for adult learners in their academic pursuits and are critical to their overall persistence. Given the potential challenges, adult learners are tasked with making difficult choices and sacrifices in their lives to persist to degree completion.

According to Cross (1981), there are three primary barriers to learning for adults: situational, institutional, and dispositional. These barriers are clusters of beliefs, behaviors, and conditions that may impact adult learners in their pursuit for higher education. Situational barriers are defined as "those arising from one's situation in life at a given time" (Cross, 1981, p. 98). Other situational barriers include lack of family support, financial challenges, and transportation. The paradox with financial barriers is that "the people who have the time for learning frequently lack the money, and the people

who have the money often lack the time" (Cross, 1981, p. 100). One obvious barrier for adult learners is time constraints (Lundberg, 2003). When adult learners have outside responsibilities and are also working professionals, there is limited time to complete schoolwork. Family stressors also play a significant role in adult learners completing their degree. According to Quinnan (1997), adult learners are "self-supporting and must assume the cost of tuition in addition to other financial obligations such as mortgage payments or rent, food, transportation and child care" (p. 72). Other situational barriers that can impact adult learners' college persistence and completion include spousal demands, child rearing, and pregnancy (Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

According to Cross (1981), institutional barriers "consist of all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities such as inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, and so forth" (p. 98). Although online programs have assisted in reducing institutional barriers, adults continue to experience challenges pursuing a college degree. Some policies and procedures that result in high levels of bureaucracy may serve as barriers for students. For example, inconvenient hours that limit adult learners' access to administrative offices, academic support services such as tutoring, and computer labs can serve as a source of frustration. Technology challenges, including cumbersome software and a lack of faculty involvement and support, are critical to adult learners' pursuit. However, positive interactions with faculty members and administrators and adult learners can have the opposite impact. According to

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Lundberg (2003), positive interactions between adult learners, faculty, and administrators have a positive impact on academic persistence.

Dispositional barriers are defined as "those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (Cross, 1981, p. 98). These barriers show up in students' attitudes and beliefs about their ability, including a lack of confidence or energy to pursue a college degree. Moreover, any previous failures or educational setbacks can serve as dispositional barriers that can negatively impact an adult learner's belief in his or her learning ability (Cross, 1981). Landin (1992) echoed the notion of fear, poor study skills, and learning ability, stating,

> The typical adult's worries about loss of learning and groundless. … Adults' experience and maturity give them an advantage over their younger classmates. As students they typically have a better sense of what they want to learn and why, and in order to go back to school they have made sacrifices in time, money, and lifestyle that bolster their determination to succeed. (p. 64)

African American male adult learners entering college often lack preparation for college-level work and are unprepared for the challenges of balancing work, family, and school (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). Many barriers these learners face impact their ability to successful earn a college degree. Despite these barriers, however, African American male adult learners continue to pursue higher education with aspirations of professional growth, because without a college degree upward mobility is severely limited (Goings, 2016). The present study is meant to raise awareness of African American males' experiences American society, and more specifically in adult education.

Examining the adult education literature revealed that few studies explore the nontraditional students' experiences from the perspective of marginalized populations (Drayton et al., 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The lack of literature on this population is critical to adult educators currently working with this population, as a plethora of literature outlines the vastly different experiences these students have in college compared to other ethnic groups (Goings, 2016). The literature does highlight many of the challenges facing nontraditional students and their ability to persist and graduate (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Markle, 2015). One of the greatest omissions in adult education today is the exploration of this marginalized population (Goings, 2016). It is incumbent upon adult education researchers to facilitate a continuous agenda to address the connection between African American males' multidimensional identities, American society, and the classroom (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). In examining adult learners, it is critical to understand their attrition in higher education.

Attrition of Adult Learners

Although the number of adult learners continues to increase on college campuses, the reasons they drop out and discontinue their education is not well-understood. One of the first studies to explore nontraditional students' attrition of nontraditional students was conducted by Bean and Metzner (1985). Since at the time, many of the attrition studies focused on traditionally aged students, Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that a study on nontraditional students' attrition was necessary. Their study defined nontraditional students as being from anywhere in the U.S.; being from urban or rural environments; being White, African American, or Hispanic; having or not having dependents; working

full-time, unemployed, retired, or working part-time; being 18 years or older; maintaining part-time student status; being single, married, or divorced; and enrolling for vocational purposes (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In this study, the term *dropout* referred to students who were enrolled at the institution for one semester but did not continue to the next semester and did not complete the program of study (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The nontraditional student characteristics focused primarily on age, residence (commuting to class), and attendance (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This model recognized factors impacting attrition, including background variables (e.g., gender, age, enrollment status, and residence); educational goals; high school academic performance; ethnicity, gender, and parents' education and academic variables (e.g., study skills and habits, academic advising, absenteeism, course availability); environmental variables (e.g., finances, employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities); and social integration variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner (1985) postulated that various student background variables (including educational goals) could impact the adult learner's decision to drop out directly or have an indirect influence via their impact upon academic variables (internal variables to the college environment) and/or environmental variables (those variables lying outside of the college). Academic variables were found to influence academic outcomes such as GPA, which sometimes led to involuntary academic dismissal by the institution or voluntary departure by the student (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This study also found that environmental factors were more critical than academic variables in

nontraditional students' departure. For nontraditional students, what happened away from classes and campus was more important than what was happening on campus.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) study and assertions have been supported by other researchers, including Villella and Hu (1991) and Cleveland-Innes (1994), who stated that external factors serve as a lead catalyst to nontraditional students' decision to drop out. Further, Schwartz (1990) and Webb (1990, as cited by Tinto, 1993) found that external factors and forces had a greater influence on nontraditional students. Moreover, Cross (1981) found that nontraditional students experience higher external demands that can impact their ability to interact with others at the institution.

Wood and Williams (2013) also examined external factors in their study on persistence among African American males in community college. The five domains of persistence included background/defining variables (factors affecting students prior to enrollment such as educational goals), academic variables (academic behaviors), psychological variables (feelings of belonging), institutional variables (institutional role), and environmental variables (life circumstances outside the institution, including family responsibility, financial responsibility, employment, and environmental pull). This study's findings indicated that environmental variables are key to persistence for African American males (Woods & Williams, 2013). Students facing major environmental challenges at the community college level were generally nontraditional students ages 24 and above (Woods & Williams, 2013).

These studies are pertinent to the conversation surrounding African American males. From an adult education lens, empirical and theoretical literature that addresses

the role of race has increased over the past 25 years, according to Guy (2014). However, few studies have given a voice to the experiences of African American male adult learners (Guy, 2014). Fleming and Kevin (2005) also stated that social science research gives little attention to the impact of educational and societal policies and practices on African American males.

Conceptual Framework

Barriers to persistence and learning, as well as double consciousness, served as the conceptual framework for this study. The first set of barriers identified by Woods and Williams' (2013) study on persistence factors impacting African American males at community colleges included academic, environmental, psychological, and institutional variables. Several studies have examined academic variables, and findings indicate that students enrolled full-time or who have a higher credit load are more likely to persist than those who hold part-time schedules or a lower number of courses (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001-2002). Environmental variables have also been examined, and according to Bean and Metzner (1985) and Freeman and Huggans (2009), who referred to the environmental variable as environmental pull, life circumstances external to the institution can impact students' overall success.

Psychological variables are another area in which numerous studies have been conducted. Based on these variables, studies have found that students most likely to persist include those who possess a strong sense of belonging at the institution (Perrakis, 2008), are satisfied with their college experience (Strayhorn, 2012; Wood, 2012), and have a strong commitment to their academic goals and dreams. The last variable related

to persistence includes institutional variables, referring to the institution's engagement and role in facilitating learning for these students. More specifically, Wood and Williams (2013) stated that African American men who traditionally attend community college are adult learners who are older, fall under the low-income classification, have dependents, are married, and have postponed their enrollment.

Adult learners face similar dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers to participation in learning (Cross, 1981). According to Cross (1981), dispositional barriers are defined as "those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (p. 98). Cross (1981) noted that dispositional barriers are often overlooked because "it is far more acceptable to say that one is too busy to participate in learning, is too old, or lacks ability" (pp. 106-107). This barrier looks specifically at students' lack of academic confidence or energy to pursue a postsecondary degree. According to Cross (1981), institutional barriers can be grouped into five segments, including scheduling problems; problems with location or transportation; lack of courses that are interesting, practical, or relevant; procedural problems and time requirements; and lack of information about programs or processes. Lastly, situational barriers might include childcare issues, lack of time, lack of transportation, and cost of education (Cross, 1981). Among the three barriers, adult learners express situational barriers most commonly as challenges to participating in education (Cross, 1981).

The variables identified in Cross's (1981) and Wood and Williams' (2013) studies examined a segment of the student population, but not through the lens of an African American male adult learner enrolled at a four-year research institution. For the purposes

of this study, variables identified by Woods and Williams (2013) regarding African American males and Cross (1981) regarding adult learners were explored to better understand the intersection between African American males and adult learners. In addition, this study explored double consciousness as it related to African American male adult learners' experiences.

Double consciousness. In understanding higher education and the challenges facing African American males, Booker T. Washington's address at the Atlanta Exposition in 1856 is particularly relevant: "We are separate as the finders yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (Washington). In order for African American males to be successful in higher education, the academic structure must be stable enough in its framework to provide varied modalities and flexible enough to address complex situations for different students. According to Du Bois (1903b), "African American males walk around with double-consciousness; an inference to what is perceived" (p. 5).

Studies indicate that African Americans are falling behind in higher education, but it is not clearly understood why. Some theorists have stated varying parts of the whole as these students' reason for dropping out. Du Bois' (1903b) framework of double consciousness tells African American males there is a strong possibility for failing academically within the education system. In addition, double consciousness can keep African American males from actively participating in educational pursuits. Therefore, this study utilized double consciousness in the conceptual framework to examine African American male adult learners' experiences in higher education.

The relevance of this concept is critical to the higher education community, as it is a direct reflection of its outside local community (Wright, 2018). According to Du Bois (1993), "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (p. 8). Du Bois' statement aligns with many of the reasons Black male students attend college in the first place.

For many African Americans, double consciousness has been critically important to establishing a balance between two worlds, one that reflects their inner qualities (African American) and one that reflects the outside world or society's demands (European American) (Alfred, 2001). According to Du Bois (1903), double consciousness is what distinguishes African Americans from other cultural groups. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois (1989) identifies double consciousness this way:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

During the early 1900s, Dr. William Edward Burghard Du Bois served as writer and political activist for Africans of the Diaspora. As an international social justice advocate, Du Bois captured the political climate of African Americans when *The Souls of Black Folk* was published in 1903. The concept of double consciousness was relevant

then and is still relevant today (Ciccariello-Maher, 2009). As a social advocate, Du Bois (1903) examined the political, economic, and social structure of the current environment and concluded that African Americans' thinking had been strongly influenced by hundreds of years of abuse. As a result, he (1903) explored feelings of being considered less human than others and ignored in mainstream society. As Du Bois reflected on his experiences with racism, he became more aware that the social construct of race held economic advantages for one group while creating economic hardships for many others (Walker, 2015. According to Vincent (1973), race plays a critical role in the overall development of double consciousness. For instance, if an individual begins to believe another individual's definition of his history and who he is, then the believer becomes confined to a world with no self-identity, which is in complete contrast to an individual finding oneness.

This study examined the first two of the three notions, known as the lower talented tenth, from the lens of African American male adult learners as they examine their understanding of their experiences at a four-year public research institution.

The lower talented tenth. The first is a third-person consciousness in which "one looks at one's self through the eyes of others or measures one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. This double consciousness is characterized by self-deception; in other words, by a false understanding or interpretation of self and life, diminishing the possibility of authentic self-presentation. The second sense of double consciousness, which predominates, gives way to self-doubt because it is characterized by what Du Bois calls, "the contradiction of double aims." In this case,

double consciousness produces disorientation, competing ideals, and irreconcilable strivings. (Haymes, 2005, p. 285)

The concepts listed above represent two of the three categories of double consciousness according to Haymes (2005). The African American men in the lower talented tenth do not possess self-confidence and are confused about the influence and effect of the European society they navigate. The third concept, titled talented tenth, is what African American males should strive to achieve. They are free of mind enslavement, as well as any body and soul dependence. They are talented African American men who are teachers, lawyers, politicians, and CEOs of major corporations. It is through education that African American men become a part of the talented tenth. The lower talented tenth was utilized in this study.

The talented tenth. The third sense of double consciousness represents for DuBois what he calls "the merging of (an African American's) double self into a better and truer self." This is a "true self-consciousness" that enables African American forms of life to carry their "message" or cultural contribution to the world. That is to say, it enables African Americans to take part in the project of civilization. (Haymes, 2005, p. 285)

The role of double consciousness for African American males in U.S. is to shed or cover the inner self while attempting to develop another self that is more appropriate for and acceptable to American society. This shedding process can create conflict for African Americans as they try to reconcile their identity as an African American and as a citizen of U.S. Developing a more acceptable mainstream self is meant to reduce or eliminate any prejudices and gain resources (Cook, 2013).

Wright's (2018) study, in which the researcher surveyed students and administrators about the relevance of double consciousness in higher education, echoed the relevance of double consciousness. The findings indicate that double consciousness is apparent in campus and racial communities and does not only exist at PWIs; rather, it is a holistic concept that impacts African American males inside and outside the classroom and society (Wright, 2018).

Wright (2018) claimed that African American males attending college have a constant need to prove themselves as competent to succeed in the classroom. For educators looking to support African American males and their experiences, Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework has been utilized to develop an understanding of the African American male's college success. This framework readily addresses the factors that contribute to African American males' experiences from three different standpoints, including pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success (Harper, 2012). The intended outcome of the framework is to assist African American males in using double consciousness to their advantage or teaching them to ignore it all together (Harper, 2012). In addition, this framework provides another lens through which African American males may change the narrative of how they relate to the world and how others may see them, as well as the manner in which they make decisions (Wright, 2018).

Conclusion

The literature related to African American males and their educational trajectory in higher education is abundant, but it is lacking with regard to African American male

adult learners' experiences at four-year institutions. Barriers facing African American males have been discussed, including under-preparedness, low enrollment, completion, and persistence challenges. Bean and Metzner's (1985) study of nontraditional students' attrition was reviewed, along with the conceptual framework for the present study, including barriers facing African American males and adult learners in concert with double consciousness. At the undergraduate level, existing literature focuses primarily on traditional African American male undergraduates. Yet the experiences of African American male adult learners attending four-year institutions are inadequately represented in the literature. Given the growing number of adult learners pursuing an undergraduate degree, these students' unique perspectives are warranted in the literature.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of African American male adult learners pursuing a bachelor's degree at a four-year public research institution. The narrative of African American male experiences is grounded in the overarching stereotypes that directly affect how they may be treated or perceived by others, which can also directly influence their educational choices (Drayton et al., 2014). There is a gap in the literature detailing how African American males who are also adult learners experience college and the impact of external environmental factors on their educational experiences. Focusing on their experiences in higher education and how external environmental factors have shaped their educational experiences as adult learners, the research sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do African American male adult learners at a four-year public research institution describe their experiences?

RQ2: What environmental factors do African American male adult learners feel have shaped their academic success or non-academic success in college?

RQ3: How does the double consciousness framework help to explain or make sense of the narrative of African American male adult learners?

A great deal of what we know about African American male college students is based on their experiences at HBCUs and PWIs. These college experiences are often from the lens of traditionally aged college students (18-24 years old) rather than adult learners (25 years or older) attending a four-year institution. There is little empirical

evidence for why African American males are more likely to attend community college than a four-year institution. Strayhorn (2017) conducted one of the few existing studies on this topic, examining the factors that influence African American males' persistence and success at four-year urban public universities. According to the findings, urban public universities provided access to college and were often the only college options available to these students (Strayhorn, 2017). Reasons participants gave for attending an urban four-year university included cost of attendance, college readiness, and academic performance prior to college (e.g., high school) (Strayhorn, 2017). Although some participants scored low on college entrance exams, they gained admission to the institution and expressed the belief that it provided them with an opportunity and access to higher education they appreciated (Strayhorn, 2017). Although this study provides some insight into these students' reasons for selecting a four-year urban university, it does not capture the factors affecting African American male adult learners' experiences at a four-year institution.

To further understand African American males' experiences as adult learners, studies are needed on their experiences at four-year institution. According to national data, enrollment for students ages 25 and older will continue to increase at a faster rate than enrollment for traditionally aged college students (BLS, 2010; Gast, 2013; Grummon, 2009; Hauptman, 2008; SREB, 2010). With an increase of adult learners on campus, it is imperative for higher education institutions to begin examining African American male adult learners' experiences and the factors that shape those experiences.

According to Drayton (2016), the shift in understanding African American male adult learners will take place when adult educators begin to understand African American men's lived experiences and their connection to learning is made visible. It is imperative for adult educators to examine factors that influence the persistence of African American male adult learners. According to Drayton et al. (2014), adult education researchers must redirect their focus on the interconnection of African American males' multidimensional identities, larger society, and the classroom.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative design approach, which enabled the researcher to capture rich and descriptive information about African American male adult learners' experiences. According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), a qualitative research design enables the researcher to gather data in natural settings rather than through written surveys. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that qualitative studies offer researchers the opportunity to explore a phenomenon about which relatively little is known. The qualitative research methodology empowers the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of this phenomenon and the flexibility to adapt the study's design to integrate new information about and interpretations of what participants communicate about their experiences (Hammersley, 1989).

Similarly, Creswell (2007) described the qualitative approach as providing a deeper understanding of a phenomenon experienced by many individuals. According to Patton (2002), the foundation of a qualitative research design is to better understand in-depth the phenomenon's attributes, the meanings participants ascribe to it, and what is

happening to participants in those moments. Merriam (2009) echoed that the purpose of a qualitative design to discover and understand a phenomenon or the meaning participants have ascribed to it. This research design takes place in settings where individuals work, live, attend school, or otherwise experience daily life as opposed to the confines of a controlled or laboratory setting.

Narrative inquiry. Within this qualitative study, a narrative design approach was used to capture participants' experiences. According to Riessman (2008), a narrative inquiry is designed for the humanities and enables the researcher to study individuals' lives through stories. Individual experiences are examined through various lenses in which they occur, such as social, cultural, and institutional narratives. Through this inquiry, the researcher explores ways to enrich and transform those experiences for themselves and others (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry is a way to understand experiences. The collaboration between researcher and participant occurs over time in a place or series of places and in social interaction with the environment. Researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated,

> An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

Additionally, narrative inquiry has a singular specific focus, such as students or professors in a classroom (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) or stories shared by an organization (Czarniawska, 2004). From a theoretical perspective, narrative inquiry is

grounded in John Dewey's theory of experience, which according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) serves as the philosophical underpinning for narrative inquiry. This viewpoint allows for the examination of experience and recognizes the representation of the person living in the world (Johnson, 1987). The focus of narrative inquiry is not solely valorizing individual experiences but also involves exploring the cultural, social, linguistic, family, and institutional narratives by which the individuals' experiences were and are compromised, formed, expressed, and enacted (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative inquiry was appropriate for use in this study for several reasons. First, this study investigated how individual and environmental factors impact students' experience at a four-year public research institution. Second, narrative inquiry specifically considers experience, explores culture, and examines how both are experienced by individuals. To this end, narrative inquiry examines both personal and social conditions simultaneously. For example, personal conditions are referred to as "the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Social conditions refer to the climate in which people's experiences and events evolve (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Conducting narrative research involves a five-step process of exploring a collection of topics. This process does not subscribe to a lock-step approach, however. The first step is to determine if the research questions are suitable for a narrative approach and can be captured through detailed stories of experiences (Creswell, 2007). Step 2 includes identifying one or two individuals who can share their stories or life experiences with the researcher. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), these

stories are also known as “field texts.” The researcher can also observe the participant and record field notes if necessary. The researcher has the opportunity to gather documents that are pertinent to the participant, as well as photographs and memory boxes (Creswell, 2007). The third step includes gathering context around the stories obtained, which involves the researcher segmenting information into personal experiences (home lives, jobs, etc.); the participants’ cultures (racial or ethnic); and the timeline of events, including time and place (Creswell, 2007). During the fourth step, the researcher analyzes the stories gathered and restores them into a sensible framework. The term *restorying* refers to a process of restructuring participants’ stories into a framework (Creswell, 2007). The last step involves the researcher and participant working together in the research process.

Researcher’s Role

The researcher’s role is to serve as an instrument of data collection, which indicates the data must be arbitrated and interpreted through a human instrument rather than through questionnaires or a machine (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). In a basic qualitative method, the researcher serves as the translator and “studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000 p. 3). As the researcher, I had to remain aware of the biases and assumptions I may hold as a self-identified African American female and current college administrator serving African American male adult learners. Thus, I adopted an approach that “attempts to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would

rule-govern the research project" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). Additionally, utilizing an array of strategies improves the truthfulness of qualitative findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2009; Morse, 1991). To ensure transparency occurred throughout the research, I utilized a journal to record personal reflections and capture the research experience.

In the process of the research, I took on the social constructivist worldview. According to Creswell (2007), a social constructivist holds the assumption that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and develop subjective meanings of their experiences. The meaning of these experiences varies and as a result, the researcher intentionally searches for the complexity of the view instead of minimizing meanings into smaller ideas or segments. More importantly, the goal of the research is to rely on participants' thoughts and views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2007). To arrive at this goal, open-ended questions are critical because they allow the researcher to listen critically to the narratives of the participants' life settings (Creswell, 2007).

My positionality. The researcher's positionality is important to the research process. The term *positionality* describes the individual's worldviews and the adopted position chosen for the study in relation to the research (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). According to Foote and Bartell (2011), "The positionality that researchers bring to their work and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes" (p. 46).

Dillard (2000) affirms there is a need to extend what we know about people of color and their lived realities; people of color are non-Whites with darker pigmentation whose experiences are shaped in part by their ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage. As an African American female, my experiences emerge from my identity. According to Takacs (2003), those experiences can assist researchers with a better understanding of the research area. Given the shared ethnic relationship between African American women and men, it is my belief and experience that systems are in place that have oppressed people of color, including in education, employment, healthcare, and housing. As the researcher, it is critically important for me to use my positionality as a means for being accountable to other African Americans.

Population Sample and Participant Description

All participants of this study were African American male adult learners enrolled at a four-year public research institution located in a northeastern U.S. city. The state university has three campuses. Campus 1 is the largest of the three and serves 50,146 students, including 36,168 undergraduate and 13,978 graduate students. This campus offers 100 undergraduate majors, 200 graduate programs and degrees, and 19 libraries. Campus 1 also houses more than 500 student organizations and more than 80 fraternities and sororities. Campus 2 has 12,231 enrolled students, with 8,170 undergraduates and 4,151 graduate students. It offers 40 majors and awards roughly 60 doctoral degrees; 1,000 graduate degrees; and 1,200 baccalaureate degrees each year. Campus 3 is the smallest of the three, with 8,100 students enrolled, 5,021 of whom are undergraduates.

There are 38 undergraduate majors and 29 graduate programs, with an average classroom size of 24 and student-to-faculty-ratio of 10 to 1.

Setting. Campus 3 served as the research site, since it is the smallest of the three campuses and is located in an urban area that serves members of the community. The student body's racial/ethnic makeup is as follows: 54.7% Caucasian, 16% Black or African American, 12.8% Hispanic or Latino, 9.2% Asian, and 7.3% unknown. To answer my research questions, it was critical to select only African American male students 25 years or older who met at least two of the following nontraditional characteristics, as defined by the NCES: (a) having deferred enrollment, (b) attending school part-time, (c) being financially self-reliant, (d) working full-time while in school, (e) having dependents other than a spouse, (f) acting as the sole provider for dependents, and (g) and receiving a GED.

The sample size consisted of five African American male adult learners who fit the previously defined characteristics and who had completed at least two semesters at the university. According to Patton (1990), "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (p. 184). A small number of participants can offer a plethora of information and can prove to be extremely valuable (Patton, 1990). The goal is to identify individuals who can generate a rich and descriptive account of the phenomenon under examination; thus, only current students were invited to participate in this study. Each participant was contacted in person, and their participation was confirmed by phone. Participants were also selected using a purposeful sampling method, which enables a researcher to select individuals and locations for studies because they can purposefully

provide an understanding of the research problem and phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007).

Thus, participants were screened by completing a demographic sheet to ensure they qualified to participate. A consent form was also given to each participant to sign, which served as a protection of their rights and confidentiality. In addition to purposeful sampling, this study used criterion sampling, which according to Patton (2001) involves "selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (p. 238). This method is especially useful when a researcher is attempting to identify and understand cases that are rich in information.

Data-Collection Strategies

Data collection was achieved using a two-tiered interview process, including both qualitative semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews. Qualitative interviewing was the tool of choice for this study because it allows researchers to explore personal and sensitive subject matters or morally vague choices made by individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach has three specific characteristics, including providing rich and descriptive information, using open-ended questions that give participants an opportunity to respond any way they deem appropriate, and using non-concrete questions the researcher can adjust (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To this end, interview questions were open-ended, as suggested by Creswell (2008), and were designed to provide a deeper understanding of a specific social phenomenon and participants' lived experiences (Silverman, 2000).

The interviews ran for 60 minutes each, were recorded with an audio-recorder, and took place on campus. I utilized field notes, which served as an additional layer of data for this qualitative study by providing rich descriptions of context for analysis (Creswell, 2013). I also conducted follow-up interviews after the first round of interviews were complete to obtain additional clarity on concepts participants identified. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), it is critical to follow up on a concept that is deemed important. Even more, concepts can take on unique meanings among specific cultural groups and can sum up critical patterns of cultural behavior that are imperative to a study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, I used a journal to record personal feelings, thoughts, and reactions regarding the participants. According to Maxwell (2013), journals can serve as additional support to a researcher's thoughts and reactions.

Interview protocol. I assured participants that their participation was voluntary and if at any point in the interview they wanted to stop, take a break, or discontinue participation, they could let me know. Also, to protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used. The interviews were scheduled in 60-minute increments and consisted of 11 questions, all pertaining to participants' family backgrounds, early and current educational experiences, reasons for returning to college and selecting a four-year public institution, experiences at their current institution, factors or barriers that may have impacted their academic progress or non-academic progress, the role of double consciousness on their educational experiences, and factors that contributed to their pursuit of a college degree.

Field notes. I took field notes after each interview to capture any missing details. They were useful during the data analysis and conclusion phase. According to Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997), the following information should be included in field notes: (1) date, time, and place of observation; (2) specific facts, numbers, and details (if any) of what occurs at the site; (3) any sights, sounds, or smells relevant to the location; (4) personal responses; (5), specific phrases, words, or summaries used during the conversation; (6) questions about the site; and (7) page numbers listed to help organize field notes.

Data Analysis

I used an eight-step data analysis process for interview findings that included organizing, familiarizing, identifying, coding, generating themes, interpreting, searching, and writing (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The audio recordings were transcribed to ensure accuracy and to assist me in becoming more familiar with the participants' responses. Coding key words and phrases participants used was useful in helping me develop themes that emerged from the interviews. Identifying themes from the coding process can assist in data analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Saldana, 2013).

The data analysis process also incorporated field notes collected during the interviews. I read these notes repeatedly to uncover any potential themes. I also used the journal notes to uncover findings. To this end, interviews, field notes, and a journal are methods to help researchers crystalize findings (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Crystallizing data enables the researcher to take additional steps beyond the traditional

concepts of science and validity and allows the information collected to be interpreted and used as scholarship (Ellingson, 2011; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered and factored into this study. To ensure the integrity of the research, I encouraged transparency throughout the data-collection process and disclosed potential conflicts of interest to participants. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection. In addition, the participants completed a consent form and I assured all participants that their participation in the interviews was voluntary and that if at any point they wanted to discontinue, stop, or take a break, they could let me know. Lastly, to increase the reliability of the data-collection process, multiple sources of data were used (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Trustworthiness. It is important to establish criteria to evaluate qualitative research. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), "All research must have 'true value,' applicability,' 'consistency,' and 'neutrality' in order to be considered worthwhile. (p.80)" To this end, the merit of a qualitative research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). In an attempt to produce trustworthy and credible research, it is imperative to consider the standards for practice, ethical concerns, and the study's context as it relates to the politics of research (Rossman & Ralls, 2012). The purpose of research is to generate findings that are "worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

Conclusion

The methodology for this study was described in Chapter 3, which has also provided an overview of the research design, site selection, participants, instrumentation used, and data collection. The research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The study was conducted at a four-year public research institution located in a northeastern city in the United States. The participants consisted of African American men 25 years of age or older who possessed at least two nontraditional characteristics as defined by the NCES (2013). With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio taped. The semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted face-to-face. The data findings are described in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

The Participants' Experiences

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens.

—Aldous Huxley

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American male adult learners enrolled at a state university. This study explored their childhood educational experiences, their reasons for pursuing a college degree later in life, and the challenges and successes they encountered along the way. This chapter provides an in-depth narration of those stories. This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach to capture the six participants' perspectives on the following research questions:

RQ1: How do African American male adult learners at a four-year research institution describe their experiences?

RQ2: What environmental factors do African American male adult learners feel have shaped their academic and non-academic success in college?

RQ3: How does the double consciousness framework help to explain or make sense of the narrative of African American males?

The narrative inquiry methodology focuses on stories people tell about themselves and their experiences. The stories participants and researchers tell anchor the research. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), people lead storied lives by nature and tell stories of those lives, while narrative researchers characterize these lives, collect and share stories of them, and write narrations of the experiences. In essence, participants' narratives focus on the voices of the human experience. The voices of African American

male adult learners, which are currently missing from the literature, are critical to the higher education landscape. This population's stories and experiences were captured through audio-recorded interviews with participants. The recordings were also transcribed to ensure the accuracy of responses. The participants' experiences are presented here as a narrative where the participants serve as the primary narrators.

The data for this study was collected in the early summer following the 2018-2019 academic year. All six African American male participants met the criteria of selection, including being 24 years of age or older; having earned more than 24 credits (holding sophomore, junior, or senior standing); and identifying as Black or African American. The research was conducted at Southern Bridge University, a large state university in the northeastern United States. Pseudonyms were used in place of the university's and the participants' names to protect the university's and participants' privacy and to maintain confidentiality. A description of the university is provided prior to the narratives. Additionally, a brief description of participants' demographics is provided in this chapter. These facts are critical in setting the context of the narrative inquiry.

Southern Bridge University

Southern Bridge University is a public research university located in an urban area in the northeastern United States. It enrolls 7,200 undergraduate and graduate students and offers 38 undergraduate and 29 graduate majors. The student body is 55% Caucasian/White, 16% Black/African American, 13% Hispanic, and 9% Asian. The university bolsters a large nontraditional population, with 45% of the student body being

25 years or older. The remaining 55% of the student body is made up of traditionally aged students ranging from 18 to 24 years old.

The Participants

Participants consisted of the following six African American male adult undergraduate students from Southern Bridge University: (1) Sam, a 47-year-old senior majoring in criminal justice; (2) Carlos, a 29-year-old junior social work major; (3) Tyrone, a 52-year-old junior social work major; (4) Wesley, a 53-year-old junior psychology major; (5) David, a 44-year-old senior criminal justice major; and (6) Mark, a 27-year-old junior urban studies major. All participants had earned an associate's degree prior to attending Southern Bridge University. Participants' family profiles were as follows: Sam, Carlos, Wesley, and Tyrone are married, while Mark and David are single. David, Sam, Wesley, and Tyrone are parents to one or more children. Each participant's experiences are shared in this chapter, and their backgrounds are detailed as they shared the experiences that led them to attend Southern Bridge University at this stage in their lives.

Sam's experience. Sam is a 47-year-old African American male senior criminal justice major with a 3.9 GPA from an urban area in the same state as the university. Sam completed the requirements for his bachelor's degree at the end of summer in 2019. While enrolled at the university, he maintained a part-time job and a full-time course schedule. He is a father to four children and a devout Muslim. While taking classes at the university, he lived in a halfway house as part of his probation terms and release from

prison. Sam is an only child raised by a single mother and absent father. He reflected on his family background:

> "I grew up with my mother in an impoverished neighborhood. She was pretty much a single parent. She had a, I call it, a boyfriend, stepfather. He didn't do anything and I guess my experience with my mother was she was everything. She was a mother and a father. I guess when you think about education, that was what she lacked in being able to give me because she dropped out of school in third grade, being a sharecropper."

Sam also stated he was a first-generation college student. Given his environmental exposure, everyone either worked a minimum wage job or was in the streets.

***Childhood educational experiences*.** As a child, Sam enjoyed school and attended his local public schools, reporting

> "I really loved school. I was what people somewhat call a nerd when I was fairly young. But when I was around 12 years old, probably around 11 years old, I went to school outside of my neighborhood, and I was the only person in my neighborhood to go to that school. I began getting bullied by older guys that were about 14 years old. By 12 years old, I stopped going to school and was introduced to criminality."

In terms of his classroom experiences as a child, Sam shared the following: "I mean, before I left school, I always did well. I have never gotten anything less than an A growing up in school." By age 24, Sam found himself incarcerated and serving a 20-year prison sentence. Given the length of his prison sentence, Sam returned to education and

received his GED and associate's degree. When reflecting on his time in prison, Sam stated,

> "I started college in prison, unlike most people, and I want to say in the beginning, maybe it was something to do to pass time, but also to see how I would fare on a college level because I got my GED while in prison. When the college opportunity in prison came about, I took advantage of it."

***Reasons for attending college*.** As the interview continued, we began discussing his reasons for wanting to pursue a college degree. Sam stated that his reasons for wanting a degree were personal, and he started by talking about his children. Prior to being incarcerated and throughout his incarceration, Sam was the primary educator for his children. He taught his children how to read and write while helping them with phonics. After carefully considering his options and potential outcomes, Sam decided to attend college:

> "Well, when it was time for me to get released, first of all, when I was inside, the university was also inside the prison, so the professors actually came to the prisons and taught under the university umbrella. But it was time for me to leave and I couldn't finish completing my bachelor's degree in prison. I knew I had the opportunity to continue with my degree but I kept asking myself what I should do. I understand that it takes money to survive. And I didn't want to put myself in a financial bind where I would be tempted or have a strain on me, maybe to go back out and sell drugs and things of this nature. But thinking about school, honestly, I feel like school, for me, was like another way to humanize myself in the public's

eyes from all these things that I did before. Unfortunately, as a Black man first of all, oftentimes we're looked at or looked down upon. And I feel like sometimes we have to prove to people that we belong or we're equal. But then at the same token, you take a black man that's coming out of prison and that just furthers the stigma or the negative perception about oneself.

***Academic success*.** Sam also discussed reasons the following reasons for his success in college:

I believe first of all that I am a motivated person to do anything I set out to do. So, I already started and set out to do it and wanted to do it. My children are also motivating me to finish. Also, this space at the university with EOF, TRIO, and the Learning Center, this space of support. There are people here who are really here to help you. I am also motivated to earn a degree because I want to set a good example, and I wanted to come out of prison and basically show other people that not only am I doing well, but I'm not the only person. I am motivated by the people I left behind in prison. There are many more behind bars who may come out of prison or never leave prison. Some of them are intellectual geniuses. I am motivated to show myself and my fallen brothers that their circumstances don't determine or make them who they are. That space where they are in prison doesn't mean that they are less than anyone else. And the individuals from neighborhoods that I come from, poverty, a lot of crime, a lot of violence. In addition to a lot of these individuals in these streets committing crimes and doing these things, they are only doing it simply because this is what they know how to

do. This is what they have been exposed to. This is their culture, social learning and things of that nature. So, I think of the other people as well, too. Poor Black people, or poor people, or those who have been disenfranchised, I represent them in a certain type of way. I am one of them, so I just try to shine a light through me to make other people see that you shouldn't basically look down upon anybody without understanding who they truly are.

Sam echoed similar thoughts when talking about his professors and their support:

> "I also had a lot of former professors, too though, from when I was in prison, who have made themselves available to me anytime I need, whether it's assistance with a paper or answer questions. My support system is great and everything is falling in line for me."

He also mentioned the role of faith as it related to his success in college:

> "I would say religion helped a lot. Being able to just pray and reflect, or pray and then when I might feel like things are difficult, I have a lot on my plate, but then, I might go pray and when I come back from praying I am just grateful for the opportunities I have and grateful to have the struggles that I had in my life."

All Sam's comments about family support were positive:

> "Even through my whole entire time in incarceration, which was a long time, I had to be an example that they could follow despite my poor choices earlier in life. They cheered me on, telling me to go to college and get a degree. As I started courses in prison and was then released to a halfway house, my family continued

to cheer me on and encourage me. I had to continue for me, but more importantly for them.

In talking about his college success, Sam mentioned the supportive environment of the university, staff, and student services:

> "I think people at this institution go beyond just being supportive. Oftentimes, you think of support, you feel like you have to go and ask for help. Around here, you have to probably tell people to stop, 'I'm okay.' Let them know, 'I'm good, I don't really need any help.' It's a really good problem to have."

Sam went on to discuss the positive experiences he has had with support services:

> "As far as academic help and things, even financial, I've learned that everything here is very good. The tutoring, everybody makes things really simple for you. In my experience, if it's not available, it seems like people will go out and try to make it available. This will be something new that comes about and is put into practice. I think, man, the people here are amazing. That's just one of the beautiful things about coming from the lifestyle and then coming from the institution of prison that I came from. Being able to be around people who are so human when you're used to being around people who are not, whether it's prison or the streets. Even when you're talking about police officers. People who are supposed to be human, oftentimes, they understand that they lost their humanity. Then coming to a place where it's just been a wonderful experience for me. Definitely a way of socializing myself back in a proactive way, in the way that I

need to be socialized, opposed to some negativity or things that could be detrimental to my success."

As the conversation focused on barriers he has faced, Sam mentioned the role of his environment:

> "Definitely. I know they did. For me, growing up, honestly, I didn't think I would see 25 years old. I didn't think I would live to be 25 years old. My environmental factors made me believe that school was for suckers or idiots. Because honestly, people in my neighborhood didn't work in spaces where college education was pretty much a prerequisite. You don't need a college education to work at McDonald's, to work doing hard labor, and things in this nature. And in my environment, watching people who sell drugs and selling a car with thousands of dollars in their pocket, while they're just collecting money, having women. All those things played an influence on me, even once I stopped being bullied, saying at 15 years old once I went to high school for a few weeks, saying, 'Why am I going to school when I can make $1,000 a day?' and just had that small mindset. Because, not having anyone around me to show me that you can make a nice amount of money legally. So, my environment, to me, a lot of people talk about nature and nurture, whether criminality is, whichever the two. But for me, I think, if it's not all nurture, then it's in the 90 percentile, because my environment played the biggest part for me."

Speaking about family members, Sam shared,

> "At age 12, the police ran in my house because of my parents selling drugs. They sold marijuana, so the police kicked them outside and ended up shooting my stepfather, who was about ten feet away from me in front of me. Although he didn't die, these experiences are things that I live with."

One of the last reflections Sam shared was his outlook on his future and what he has learned:

> "My outlook is so much different in life. Lots of self-reflection to understand, like, 'What did I do to put myself in this situation?' So, I started there and once I got deeper and deeper into the religion, this played a part in me changing the way I see life and what was available. Even reading the history of different religions and how people were in different spaces and times. Then it came down to education and once education was mixed with all of that stuff, especially African studies. I really love Africana studies. So, I now see myself as someone that is special and can offer something special to the world. And education plays a great part in it. And now, I see myself as an individual who can help and give back to others and hopefully to try and help some people that are at risk understand those same problems I grappled with when I was in the streets when I was young. Like, why is life this hard? I can sit down with these individuals and explain to them why you feel these ways."

Sam's narrative reflected on his childhood, relationship with education, and exposure to environmental factors that led him to prison. Through his life experiences and time incarcerated, he was reintroduced to his love of education, which eventually

landed him at a university. He explained how his children served as his source of motivation to pursue a degree, while his time in prison shaped his outlook on life. He faced many obstacles but has overcome each challenge and landed in a space of personal triumph and success.

Carlos's experience. Carlos is a 29-year-old junior social work major with a 4.0 GPA from an urban area in the state where the university is. At the time of the interview, he was working full-time and taking a part-time course load. He had gotten married recently and does not have any children. Prior to attending the university, he earned an associate's degree from a local community college. Carlos grew up in a blended family, as both parents divorced and remarried. His dad remarried more than once, and by elementary school, Carlos had stepbrothers and stepsisters. His mother attended secretarial school and his dad started college using the GI Bill but never finished.

***Childhood educational experiences*.** In elementary school, Carlos was a strong student and always received good grades. He always read above his grade level, so by the fifth grade, he moved to another reading level with kids older than him and started getting teased because he was younger but reading at older students' level. Additionally, he was placed in the gifted and talented programs. However, he did not perform well in those classes:

> "Stuff like gifted and talented, I wasn't really motivated to do, and I guess I wasn't ready to embrace what other people saw in me. I was just really being myself, worrying about having fun and being with other kids. So, after being placed in a higher reading level, I subconsciously rebelled against that and I did

get in trouble a little bit. And then at one point, when we moved again, they wanted to label me as ADHD."

During high school, Carlos was faced with various challenges but had the support of a high school counselor, an African American woman who understood him and what he needed. According to Carlos, she served as a support system at school and created a safe haven for him:

> "Growing up, even pretty much up until the last few years, academically I didn't live up to my full potential or expectations. And that created a lot of frustration with people that really cared about me. So that's why I'm really focused in school now."

***Reasons for attending college*.** After high school, Carlos decided to pursue a college degree by attending a local community college due to the low cost of tuition. He also decided against a traditional four-year institution since he had not performed that well in high school. Carlos shared his education and career aspirations:

> "I started doing really well toward the end of my associate's degree because I knew I wanted to be a pilot. To make sure I completed my associate's degree on time, I overloaded my last semester because I wanted to start aviation school in the summer."

After earning an associate's degree, Carlos decided to follow his passion of being a pilot. He enrolled in the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Aviation School in Daytona Beach, Florida. Although he was not receiving any financial support from his mom or dad, he decided to see if he could make it work. Carlos shared, "Unfortunately, it cost

$60,000 a year to attend." Based on the cost, Carlos withdrew from flight school, completely disappointed and defeated after one semester.

Determined to turn things around, he contacted the Air Force to see if he could pursue his pilot dreams through the service. He passed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test with flying colors but met some challenges with the medical exam. Carlos was born with a heart murmur that could present a challenge. Although he had been able to play sports throughout his life, his condition ultimately disqualified him from pursuing a career as a pilot. As a result, he had to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. To help with his decision, he started working various jobs and took a break from college. After a six-year break, Carlos decided to return to school to pursue a degree in social work:

> "Prior to deciding on the major of social work, I applied and got into the School of Business at the university. I initially applied to this program because I was thinking, 'Now it's back to accounting and finance.' However, I ended up deferring my enrollment because I think I was scared and didn't want to spend all that money. I was afraid of taking out a lot of loans that I could not pay back. Up until that point, I was debt free and living on my own. But despite the financial commitment, I landed on social work as a major and knew it was the right fit. I ended up reapplying to the university after deferring and got accepted to their social work program."

During our discussion about college and his reasons for pursuing a degree, Carlos mentioned cost and in-state tuition. He also shared the following:

> "I know the importance of education. That's been taught to me through my parents. Neither of my parents have traditional schooling and didn't finish college. My mom went to school for many years but it was more for when the schools taught you secretarial skills and things like that. So, she had the schooling and experience. My father, he was in the Navy for a short period of time, and he used the GI Bill to actually go to this university, but never finished."

Academic success. Carlos went on to discuss the reasons he believes he is successful in college today:

> "It is the passion that I have for what I am pursuing. I do have a support system such as my wife, who I just married. She definitely supports me in all that I do and that helps a lot. What's really driving me is my purpose and passion and also, I have a lot of things that I want to accomplish, and I look at this degree as the first step toward my plan. I also believe my faith sustains me and that always helps as you work toward goals. I think of myself as a role model. Even though my upbringing was different from many others, I want to set an example for my family."

Carlos further shared, "I didn't always have the confidence that I have now, and I think it's because I have had life experiences and challenges, so I am better prepared." In discussing his experiences at the university and barriers he has faced, he shared,

> "As an adult learner, I do not have the time I wished to get things done, so time is definitely an issue. I am also worried about my finances and being able to afford my classes. In terms of my professors and the university itself, I really like it here.

I think my professors in my program are very supportive and are available to answer any questions I have. The social work program here is very strong and the faculty are very involved in the classroom and with their students. Overall, my experience has been good and I am looking forward to finishing."

As the discussion continued, Carlos mentioned the impact of environment on a person's life:

"The environment I grew up in was pretty good but I didn't know a lot of people who had a blended family and still felt alone. We moved around a lot and when my mom and dad divorced, it took a toll on me in ways I didn't realize. I was constantly adjusting to new environments, and so some environments were really bad while others were okay. Ultimately, I think being exposed to different environments made me better, but it didn't come without challenges."

Carlos's pursuit of a college degree was not his first career option. Although his dream of being a pilot was altered due to a medical condition, Carlos has found his way and is excited about accomplishing his goals that include earning a college degree. He has a great support system through his family and with the faculty in the social work program. Despite financial concerns and time constraints, Carlos is committed to his academics and is excited about earning a degree.

Tyrone's experience. Tyrone is a 52-year-old junior social work major with a minor in psychology and a 3.6 GPA. At the time of the interview, he was not working but taking classes full-time. He is the father of six children from previous relationships and is married. He is a homeowner and has a driver's license. He grew up in an urban area

within the state and was raised by a single mother. He is the youngest of five boys and one girl. His father was absent from his life and his neighborhood was riddled with crime and drugs. His mother raised her children in a three-bedroom home.

Childhood educational experiences. Tyrone indicated that as a young student, he would procrastinate on his assignments and was very stubborn. To offset his behavior, he made sure he was always on the teacher's good side. According to Tyrone, his mother worked two jobs and as a result, his sister helped him do his homework. After graduating from high school, Tyrone thought he could make fast money by selling drugs. At some point, this behavior landed him in prison and he ended up doing extensive jail time:

> "When I left home, I went out in the streets and tried to strike it rich. And the money I made only went right back to the system. I've done some extensive prison time for selling drugs and at one point in time, I started using the drugs I was selling and I got hooked on drugs. So that rendered me homeless and walking the streets here in the city, and I just got tired, and I went down to North Carolina to get myself together. I didn't like it there, so I came back up and moved with my mother to another suburb."

After this failed relationship, Tyrone began seeking support for his drug habit and started going to church. He met a wonderful woman there, who he eventually married and who helped him get clean years later. He has now been sober for five years and graduated from a local community college with an associate's degree.

Reasons for attending college. Today, Tyrone is able to set an example for his six daughters. Since being enrolled in school, his children could not be prouder. He was

recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but he stated that it would not stop him from pursuing his degree. Tyrone credits his personal success to his wife and God. He is a Christian man and believes his faith has pushed him through. Tyrone's reason for pursuing a degree was based on medical and personal reasons:

> "I was a Local 222 labor union worker here in the city. In 2011, my legs started being weak, and I didn't know what was going on. And I got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2012, and I couldn't work anymore. Then my wife said, 'Well, why don't you come to school? You can go for free, and you can do anything you want to do in school.' So, I decided on social work because people helped me along. I graduated from community college with a behavioral health service degree. And then I came here for a bachelor's in social work."

Tyrone echoed the role of faith in his life:

> "Definitely church. My pastor, my wife, and the Reverend Bundie. I look around my community and see people walking around like zombies. Then they say to me, 'Man, you look like you are shining, you look good.' I think about what God brought me from, brought me through, and now I am in college working toward a degree. I don't want to go back to that."

Tyrone's biggest supporters are his wife, children, and late sister. Although his sister passed away, she still serves as a great sense of inspiration. He spoke about her earlier in the interview: "She was one of my first teachers and always helped me with homework." In addition, Tyrone discussed self-motivation and determination as critical factors in his continuous quest for a college degree:

> "Just determination and looking back on my past where I was always the class clown and a knucklehead. I just look back at where I made more mistakes in the past. Not studying, not paying attention, not participating. And I pride myself on doing those things in each and every class I am in today. I sit up front, talk a lot to the professors, and ask questions. I do my homework to ensure I know and understand the course material. I don't want to lose this. I don't want to say I just got by. I don't want anybody to help me get by. I mean, they can help me, but I want to do it. You know what I mean."

Additionally, Tyrone discussed the importance of self-determination:

> "It's just self-determination, and then, like I said, it's other students, they look up to you. I don't know if it is something on me or what I look like, but people look up to me, and they encourage me. So, I guess I have self-determination but also motivated by others."

Another factor that served as a challenge for Tyrone is his disability. Because of his multiple sclerosis, he is unable to walk, though he is able to get around on a motorized scooter. When talking about his college experience, Tyrone mentioned the lack of accessibility at certain building entrances: "Yeah, so I don't look at myself as handicapped. I had an issue with a door swinging open and it was frustrating, but I look at everything as a challenge."

Academic success. Tyrone credits his support system on campus for his success as a college student:

> "I know there is help out there. I know the professors, if you approach them and if you do what you're supposed to do, they'll help you. And I mean, I know that right now I can ask for help, no problem. I don't believe in failure anymore. I know I can, I believe in myself."

Tyrone also shared that his professors have served as a great resource: "I can always get assistance or ask for help from my professors and that ultimately helps me when it comes to performing well academically." Tyrone's narrative detailed a story of triumph and perseverance, as he battled drug addiction early in his life and incarceration. In spite of life's challenges and his personal choices, Tyrone has found his relationship with God to be the most important in his life, along with his wife's support. Although Tyrone is currently dealing with health issues related to multiple sclerosis, he cannot be deterred and is excited about his college journey and what new opportunities this journey will bring.

Wesley's experience. Wesley is a 53-year-old junior psychology major with a 3.0 GPA. At the time of this interview, he worked full-time and took classes part-time. He is married with one son. He grew up with his mother and father in southern Oregon. Both parents had a high school education and his father served in the Air Force. As a result, they moved around often but mainly between Oregon, Washington, and Florida. By age five, Wesley's parents had divorced and he and his mother moved to Washington State. Wesley had a good relationship with education growing up. When he was in the third grade, his parents took him to see a psychologist, which he did not realize until years later

happened because they had concerns about his behavior in school. In the end, it was determined that Wesley was bored in school:

> "After the psychologist finished with me, she told my parents and teachers that she realized I was just bored because I was going over material that I'd done before. Teachers gave me extra work to do and I was good after that. I didn't realize, no, I never realized my mother told me just about five years ago that it was a psychologist that I went to see, what that was all about. "

***Childhood educational experiences*.** While in his sixth-grade year in Oregon, Wesley's parents divorced. It took a toll on Wesley and school became more challenging, especially math:

> "School was mostly easy for me early, until I went to school in the sixth grade after my parents were split up. When I did catch on, I didn't ask for much help. That was in math, that was the class where I was excelling before. And I still place some blame on the teacher; I was the only Black child in the sixth grade at the time. The teacher did not give me any help. She actually gave me extra work."

By junior high school, Wesley was placed in remedial math classes. According to Wesley, he went from being bored to being placed in remedial courses. His mother remarried in high school and Wesley's stepfather was not involved in his upbringing at all. At that time, Wesley felt as if his mother was not as concerned as she had been and no longer cared about his grades, so he did not worry about them either.

As Wesley matriculated through high school, he found some teachers to connect with and provide feedback. After high school, Wesley joined the army, serving for seven years on active duty and one year in the reserves. He met his wife in the army and started a family. After leaving the service, he began working various jobs to earn money for his family:

> "I was trying to figure things out for the most part. I had been doing retail jobs and stuff like that. Then a new job teaching prisoners computer skills and reentry life skills opened up. I took the job and was on the custody side of operations. At this job, I was able to see what a difference it made for people who got out and were able to conquer their substance abuse problems."

***Reasons for attending college*.** As Wesley continued with his job, he knew a degree would afford him the opportunity to move up. Thus, after 25 years, Wesley decided to return to school and earned his associate's degree at a local community college. After earning his associate's degree, he continued on to a four-year university to work towards his bachelor's degree. He shared that his decision to pursue a degree was rooted in the desire to have better career options:

> "I was trying to figure out what I want to do for the most part. I had been doing retail jobs and stuff like that and I needed a plan. I was working 60 to 65 hours a week at Dunkin Donuts and then working at Blockbuster 20-plus hours a week. So, I wanted a job that would definitely pay better. I read an article in the newspaper somewhere about a program, I believe it was in Chicago, about teaching prisoners to learn computer skills and reentry life skills. No, actually it

was about helping others by becoming a substance abuse counselor. Ultimately, I want to simply help people and a bachelor's degree would allow me to do that."

Academic success. As the interview continued, we arrived at the reasons for Wesley's current success in college. According to Wesley, faith has played a major role in his college success, sharing that it serves as his foundation in life and that all things happen as a result of his beliefs. In addition to his faith, Wesley shared that his wife and son serve as motivational factors for his success:

"When I first started classes, my son was a freshman at Columbia University. He was able to go on and graduate from there and now he lives in New York City and is working. So, we were both in school and I wanted to make sure I was keeping up. And now he is waiting on me to graduate."

Wesley also believes his self-motivation and determination propelled him to continue pursuing a degree:

"I know I can absolutely do it. And sometimes I think that I might be hampered because I'm working, trying to study for school and study so I can get certified with the state and get my written and oral exam for work. I know I have a lot on my plate, but I can get it done because I have to."

In discussing barriers, he has faced while pursuing his degree, Wesley stated that school has not always been a priority:

"I think for me, the biggest thing is probably that going to school hasn't always been the highest priority. And just stating it that way is a barrier to being able to put everything into it that I could. There's an expectation that I will get through it

and do well. I think it's important that I make sure I'm on schedule to do the work."

Wesley also shared his concern about his lack of skills to navigate computer work: "I don't have to use a computer at work, so getting adjusted to using the computer and the online platform of Canvas has been very difficult." He also identified finances as a major barrier toward success. The cost of tuition along with the cost of books, computers, and other supplies presented a challenge for Wesley. As we discussed the role of environment, Wesley shared the impact his environment had on his development as a student:

> "An environmental factor that is contributing to my motivation and drive currently is having good people like Dr. C around me to push me to be better. There's several people at my church that have their advanced degrees and it's always encouraging, but I know people are out there, but when you get to see it on a regular basis, that's a great help."

Lastly, Wesley mentioned his classroom experiences and how he has learned so much from his classmates who are 20 years younger than him: "I am also very pleased with all my professors that I've had thus far. One of my psychology professors I had for three classes is half my age, at 27 years old. She is young but so knowledgeable and great." Wesley's narrative detailed his relationship with education from childhood to his commitment to take care of his family and be a role model to his son. Wesley described his internal drive to make as much money as possible and found himself working 60 hours a week between two jobs. Then at some point, he found his passion in working

with incarcerated men on life and computer skills to reenter society, which changed his mind set and helped him decide to attend college so he could begin working on his degree and land the professional job of his dreams. Wesley also described how proud he is to be a parent and role model to his son.

David's experience. David is a 44-year-old senior criminal justice major from a midwestern urban city. He completed the requirements for his bachelor's degree at the end of summer in 2019. While enrolled at the university, he maintained a part-time job and a full-time course schedule. He is a father to four girls and is married. His parents were divorced when he was 18 months old. His mother was a single parent with a high school education. His father was not involved in his life and he was an only child. David always enjoyed school and performed well but had behavioral issues. He often acted out as a result of the divorce and he described his mother as being extremely angry.

***Childhood educational experiences*.** During our conversation, David detailed an incident that occurred in school regarding his anger and acting out:

> "So, I'll give you an example, kindergarten. I remember this clearly. The teacher was about to teach the class arts and crafts. She had us all come gather around this table. There was one chair left. And so, there was a girl and myself approaching the chair at the same time. And I stopped, and the girl pushed me down. I fell down on the floor, and she sat in the chair. And so, the teacher, instead of in my mind, now that I think back about that, I thought that she should have said to the girl not to push, right? Or at least, 'Get another chair.' So, she made me stand up, I guess because boys are supposed to be perceived as tough. So, she told me to get

up and I felt in the moment she didn't defend me or say anything. I just knew it was wrong. So while she was teaching the people how to use the safety scissors for children and cutting pieces of yarn and giving it to the people, I got my scissors and I snuck up behind her and I cut her hair, the teacher."

As a result of his behavior, David was expelled from kindergarten. This early experience had a major impact on his view of educators for the rest of his education. According to David, he became more cautious of people, not just teachers but anyone who was trying to teach him something. He believes the contentious relationship he had with teachers growing up was a result of not knowing how to channel those emotions. He also described the lack of African American representation among his teachers:

"I always looked for somebody who looked like me. All through elementary and middle school and even high school, the only Black male figure that I ever had was my band teacher. So, I took high school band for four years and played the saxophone. So, the majority of my teachers all my life has been White women. I don't necessarily have a disdain, but I don't know. I don't have any animosity toward them, but I don't know."

Throughout his childhood, David mentioned that although he always earned good grades, his mother would come to the school and discipline him. He recalled one example of this discipline: "She would come to the school and use the principal's paddle on me. She projected a lot of her anger on me. She never asked me a question or talked, she just used to discipline me." After high school graduation, David got married and started a family. By his early thirties, he was a father of four daughters and working various jobs.

According to David, given various circumstances, he committed a crime and spent the next decade incarcerated. While in prison, he was selected to participate in a prison-to-higher-education program, which allowed him to earn roughly 90 credits while incarcerated. While in prison, David served as a teacher's aide and had the opportunity to teach GED classes. He enjoyed helping others learn. Once he got out of prison, he wanted to continue in the program and decided to attend Southern Bridge University.

***Reasons for attending college*.** David decided to attend college because the university was 15 minutes from his current residence, the partnership between the prison and higher education was very strong, and he had a strong desire to learn. The role of family has also played a critical role in David's success: "I believe my wife of 20 years and four daughters served as a great sense of support for me while I was incarcerated and now while pursuing this degree." He shared that while their support encouraged him, his oldest daughter had some issues with him going to school:

> "The younger three girls have definitely been supportive, but my oldest daughter was angry. She was 15 years old when I was sent away to prison. She was so upset that she ran away the day of the sentencing. She used to come visit me while I was incarcerated but then stopped. She tried college, I think two semesters, and didn't like it so she quit. She is starting to come around. I plan to continue to law school once I earn my degree because I want her to see the value of education."

***Academic success*.** David received a great deal of support from faculty at Southern Bridge. He mentioned that faculty in the criminal justice department were very

supportive. In addition, he shared that his self-motivation comes from a desire to learn and be the best he can be. He also mentioned the role of advocacy: “Yes, I want to help make some changes. One thing that I think people who’ve been incarcerated and participate in higher education, we have lived experiences that they don’t. We are converting the classroom theory into real lived life experiences.”

In terms of challenges or barriers, David shared that he did not have the experience of living in a halfway house when he was released to his wife and children. However, he did not use computers often while in prison, so he had difficulty navigating them when he was released. According to David, “Something so simple like writing a paper on the computer was difficult because I had to learn how to operate Microsoft Word.” Another institutional barrier he identified was the lack of support he felt on campus:

> “I still have to be mindful of the limitations of the institution, right? It’s still two institutions, right? So, you still have the police walking around, police in the Black male figure. You still have that. You still have the skeptical White people. Especially the girls, when they see, they grab their purses. Uniquely, yesterday I had a meeting for my community engagement with this county reentry committee I’m on. And so, the librarian right here on campus, the librarian, she’s on our committee, too. She was there, so we were talking about a space where we can interview people to start this mentoring program. So, she saw me at the meeting on the 16th floor in the City Hall yesterday. We’re all there. I stop at the food truck to speak to who cooks the food at the food truck. Yeah, and so she’s

walking up the sidewalk. As I cross the street and she sees me, I see her grab her bag. She doesn't recognize me, and we were just in the meeting together. So, I paused so she could get a little bit closer. And when she got within ten feet, she let go of her bag because she realized it was me. And then we began to talk. She said, 'Oh, I didn't realize you were so close.' I said, 'Yeah, I work over there at the front desk. I didn't know this was the library you were referring to either.' She said, 'Yeah, you should stop by.' And I could see her whole demeanor changed."

Lastly, David discussed his experience with campus resources:

"When I have gone to utilize services on campus, the staff are always willing to assist me. They don't know my background and they don't care. The staff are looking to provide you with the support you need to be successful and I am thankful that it is available. I also think this way about the professors; they are very supportive."

David's narrative detailed his early anger and behavior issues that resulted from his parent's divorce. David mentioned several times throughout the interview how angry his mother was and how she took that anger out on him by being a strong disciplinary figure. These disciplinary experiences shaped David's trajectory in adulthood. He went on to marry and have four daughters but eventually found himself incarcerated for ten years for a crime he committed. While incarcerated, David found his joy and passion for education again and started taking college classes in prison. Ultimately, he continued his degree pursuit once released and decided to take his passion for advocacy and use his voice to help other incarcerated men.

Mark's experience. Mark is a 27-year-old junior urban studies major with a 2.5 GPA. Mark is currently unemployed and taking classes part-time. Mark grew up on the West Coast and was the son of a father in the military. His mother and father are married and have been together since he can remember. During his early teens, his family decided to move to the suburbs in the northeastern U.S.

***Childhood educational experiences*.** As a student, Mark performed well in class but struggled with mathematics. He recalled a time in fifth grade when his teacher got upset because he could not solve certain problems. Mark also mentioned the lack of diversity among his teachers: "I don't think I have had any African American teacher when I was young, I don't think I had any teachers at all. It's been very White." Mark shared,

> "I'm a military brat, so I used to go to school in San Diego, California, and then moved to the East Coast, then I moved around different parts of the East Coast. By junior year of high school, we moved and I started a new school. So, I have been around people for a long time and many different types of learning environments."

During his high school years, Mark experienced more diversity among the students and teachers. He remembers one teacher who worked at the high school as a counselor. He recalls this counselor making such an impact on his experience that he was able to connect with and understand him:

> "She was a director of counseling in the district and she was a Black woman who worked in high school. She was real and honest and she understood what I

needed. I can honestly highlight my whole life, she might be able to flip my whole opinion now because she's been incredible, and I was lucky to have her in high school. I didn't really have a lot of African American teachers, African American teachers that really connected or resonated with me. Now one thing that I can recollect, especially in elementary school and in high school and in middle school. We had a lot of African American substitutes."

Mark shared that many of the African American substitute teachers never became full-time teachers at his schools. After high school, he was headed to a four-year university in a large northeastern city, but things shifted when his finances changed. According to Mark,

"My father, who was a military veteran, had access to the GI Bill. This bill covered up to six years of college tuition. My father told me I was only getting one year of the GI Bill and my sister was getting the remaining five years since she was attending art school. I was very frustrated by this decision and as a result decided not to go to a traditional four-year institution with a cost of $60,000 a year. Instead, I saved his money and attended a local community college."

During our discussion, Mark expressed his frustration with not having the same financial support from his father but he was not going to allow that to stop him from getting an education:

"I didn't feel supported pursuing my associate's degree and definitely don't feel supported now. I believe I have a support system but it's just not my family. I definitely feel like it's important to have some type of support system. But I don't

think I have a go-to support system like family. I have a collective amount of people that I can rely on, but I really rely on the world to just absorb my emotions sometimes."

Reasons for attending college. After earning his associate's degree from a community college, Mark took some time to work and earn a living. His associate's degree opened a few doors but not as many as a bachelor's degree would. During our discussion, he stated, "I have a ton of experience and a lot of that experience is accredited to, I would say having confidence after my associate's degree underneath my belt to demand a certain level of position." Given his push to further his career, Mark decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in urban studies. Although he is frustrated with the lack of support he receives from family and the university, he is trying to devise a plan to move forward so he can have a career and not just a job. Furthermore, Mark believes a degree would allow him to move up in a company or organization based on the feedback he has received during interviews.

"I'm a Black male in this world, working as hard as I can, right, and living a particular lifestyle of really trying to do what I'm doing and live the way I see fit. At the same time, I have gotten a lot of nos before I get a yes from companies I have applied to. I have gotten a $14-an-hour job where someone who has a bachelor's degree can make $30 an hour. I want to be able to compete and right now I can't do that with my associate's degree. I want to have a career and not just a job, so that is why I want this degree."

Another barrier Mark identified is the lack of institutional resources. He discussed his concerns about the lack of full-time faculty teaching the courses he has taken, as well as not having enough resources for his major, urban studies. In addition, Mark went on to comment on the various majors Southern Bridge offers and not having the proper resources to help students grow:

> "The institution offers a variety of widespread majors and a whole bunch of minors and this and that. Yes, you have a beautiful school here and you have a reputable law school and that's great. But all these lists of majors that you really have, some of them don't even catch the attention of a real professor. It just seems as if they don't have the funds to pay full-time faculty."

Academic success. Despite Mark's challenges with the university, he is still interested in earning his degree. Many of the academic challenges he has faced are a result of his unstable home life:

> "I have performed well in my classes when I am not always worried about money, where I am going to live, or my support system. When this hasn't been a challenge, I do really well in my classes because I can focus. When I don't have these things in order, it impacts how I perform in class, but I am working to get back in the swing of things because I have done well in the past."

Mark's narrative detailed his relationship with education, the challenges he faced when he realized his parents would not cover the cost of his college tuition, and the issues he has with his current program of study. Mark also detailed the challenge of feeling

unsupported by family and friends. Despite his concerns, Mark is committed to finishing and earning his degree.

Summary of Participants' Experiences

The first segment of participants' narratives captured all six men's experiences, highlighting their childhood educational experiences, reasons for attending college, and academic successes. Some participants also highlighted challenges including access to and usage of technology and having limited time to complete assignments. Another area three of the participants identified as a life-changing experience was their extensive time in prison. Additionally, the participants discussed racism and the various challenges of being an African American male in a society riddled with negative stereotypes and perceptions of these men as human beings. Their experiences with racism are highlighted in the next section.

Experiences with Racism

The veil. As each interview concluded, I had the opportunity to discuss with each participant the challenges of being a man of color in modern American society and the phenomenon of seeing oneself through the eyes of the world versus how one sees himself. We discussed W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, as well as its relevance in today's world. David made the following statement:

> "So, I'm always dealing with that dual duality of the lens, how am I presenting myself? What is your perception of what you think you see, your perspective? So, in class sometimes, certain things that the textbook says or that the professors say in their presentations or their lectures, I challenge it, but in question form a lot.

You understand? I challenge it so that not to put everybody in the same group but the average person has not been in prison. They have a certain academic lens that they look through based on their experiences because they've never been directly impacted per se by the criminal justice system unless it was maybe their father who was a policeman and he got shot or injured, right? That's their position, especially in this criminal justice field that I'm in. So, I think certain things that I would say or attempt to do on campus, I'm reluctant to do, and I know it would help give the people a different perspective. And then some things, I'm intentional with what I do, like how I dress sometimes just because I know that has a multiplicity of conversational expositories that can come out of the power of appearance. I have these multiple looks that I bring to this space and to different places in this space on purpose so that…Sometimes my classmates, they hear how I articulate certain things but then they look at my clothes, but I do that for the people that's out in society that don't attend so that sometimes, you can look at these same people and understand that they're not as dumb as they look. They're not as dangerous as you think. Some of them are me. We were just in a meeting together. It's me."

Mark echoed similar feelings and believes how a Black man is viewed in the world versus how he views himself has been a common theme throughout his life:

"There is definitely a disconnect with how I see myself and the way the world sees me sometimes. Because I feel like they don't allow me to be my true self, but then at the same time, they're not ready for it, because I'm a stickler on oratory,

professional oratory, so I speak differently. I mean, I'm an adult. You won't ever catch me sagging my pants or living up the stereotypes you see, because I don't like that. Just like to be comfortable. I don't like to run around or walk around and keep pulling up my pants. It's annoying. It gives me a headache. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Wesley shared similar thoughts around his experience with the concept as it related to his educational journey:

"Talking about double consciousness because then it was evident. Some people, some of the professors, have certain beliefs based on their experiences or ideas of Black men. And they bring their own attitudes about Americans, about African Americans, others. But I could feel that. Usually, though, because I've been good with academics even in that setting. I can see the difference as people get to know that I'm not a slacker. I'm not ignorant. Perceptions may change a bit, attitudes change a bit, but approaches definitely change. In short, I think you get more respect once you've proven yourself. Not necessarily acceptance."

Sam shared his views on the idea of double consciousness and his reasons for wanting to pursue a degree to improve his outward perception and appearance to others:

"I mean, absolutely. And I read that book. It was a great book. You want to make people see you in a different light or a better light. But even I'll take it from a classroom perspective. Me being incarcerated, a criminal justice major, I had a young White student say to me, because I was doing so well in every class, As in every class, and giving discussions with the professor going back and forth on the

material. And one day, we got our grades back for our exam and he said, 'How did you do?' And I said, 'I did alright.' And he's like, 'Well, what's your grade?' And I'm like, '90-something.' And he said to me, 'Of course you did. [Talking about the double consciousness because then it was evident. Some good.] You know this stuff because that's what you lived.' Basically, 'You did well because you're a former criminal and you were in prison and you know about crime. So that's why you did well in a criminal justice class.' And to me, I thought that was a little slight. So, I said to him, I said, 'Well, yeah, but I'm kind of used to doing well in all my classes. It doesn't make a difference which classes I have, I get all As.' And I said that because I understood that he was an individual who was struggling. And I didn't want to be mean but at that point it's like, 'Okay, let me explain to you that I don't just do well in criminology. I can do well in any facet of life. And your circumstance of having White skin. Your circumstance of growing up with money, being educated and going to school 12 years straight, 15 years straight, does not make you any better than me in an academic setting.' And so, I always understood, even now, that I'm constantly being examined. Examined, so to say. When I come into a class, the first thing I let a professor know is my situation that I've been in prison and I spent the last 20 years of my life in prison."

Sam went on to share professors' various responses regarding his disclosure of information.

“Most professors are like, ‘Oh, wow.’ They believe that, ‘Oh, it’s going to be interesting.’ And some of them are happy, especially when you talk about criminal justice, to see if I have any perspectives. Usually, by the time we get into a few weeks in class and I start engaging with the professors, they’re very happy that I’m in their class. I just got an email from one of my professors, my criminal justice professors, thanking me for being in his class and telling me not only how much not only the class learned, but he learned from me being in the class. He actually used to come up to me after class and ask me how he was speaking about certain topics because he understood that I knew them better than he knew them, but from a different perspective. Then you have some professors. I had one professor who was pro-incarceration and things of that nature. And he used to come off very condescending at times. I found it easy for me or wanting to also prove to him too that no, I belong here. Because I saw that he felt, unfortunately, like a lot of people feel about people who come from a prison setting or who have been involved in crime and things of that nature, ‘Okay, you’re just a criminal.’ And it’s like, ‘No, crime is something that I did. I committed crimes. But that’s not who I am.’ But the whole double consciousness thing, definitely just people see you, especially as a Black man, Black woman in America, people are going to look at you and they’re going to judge you from a lens. You’re always going to be surveillance and it’s kind of tricky because not only are you trying to be a human being, or you’re trying to be a man, you’re trying to be a student, a father,

whatever it is, but you're constantly also being understood that you're being watched and having to live a life through a certain way through a certain lens."

Tyrone experienced a similar response from his professors regarding his past and how he connected it to his views of double consciousness:

> "When I told my story about my life to my professor and how I spend time in prison and my addiction, I would think that they would look down on me, like, "Here we go, another one." But then they didn't respond that way. They actually encouraged me, so I didn't feel the double standard in the way I originally thought I would. In the past, I have based my own ability to succeed on what others perceived my ability to be but I found out later that wasn't necessary. It was more about how I viewed and valued my own ability."

Carlos echoed similar comments around double consciousness and the ways it may have appeared throughout his educational journey:

> I have always thought of myself in a positive light, believing I can accomplish anything. When my medical condition essentially stopped me from becoming the one thing I dreamed about my entire life, I was devastated. As I began to work these random jobs, I started to believe some of the perceptions society has about Black men and their success or lack thereof. I started to wonder if I would be a failure all of my life and not have a career. It wasn't until I started a job working with youth and then started to see my impact on them. Then I said, 'I need to go to school to make a larger impact and be an example instead of a statistic.'"

Conclusion

This chapter honored the essence of a narrative inquiry study in that it presented the participants' perspectives of their college experiences as adult learners, starting from their childhood educational experiences, to their reasons for attending college, to the various challenges they have faced involving finances, time, access to technology, limited program resources, and health issues. Even more, the participants discussed the importance of family support, faith, and faculty and staff that have supported them in their college pursuit. Three of the participants, Sam, David, and Tyrone, also discussed their time in prison and the impact it had on their overall lives. These men faced a multitude of challenges but never gave up and as a result have found success in pushing forward, no matter the cost. The six narratives highlighted in this chapter enabled me to identify five major themes that are covered in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Findings and Themes

> If in your lived experience you felt some type of a struggle, or you've experienced a type of injustice where you've been wronged, it just opens up your perspective to the possibility that other people might be going through some difficult things.
>
> —Kyong

According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry begins and ends with an appreciation for ordinary lived experiences. The stories shared in Chapter 4 capture the rich experiences of Sam, Carlos, Tyrone, Wesley, David, and Mark, six African American male adult learners enrolled at a state university. All six men are first-generation college students who represent various areas of study, including criminal justice, urban studies, psychology, and social work. Among the participants, all work full- or part-time except Tyrone, whose unemployment was a result of health issues related to multiple sclerosis. Everyone except Carlos and Mark has children. Each participant's narrative included information on their childhood educational experiences, reasons for attending college, academic success, and experiences with racism and stereotypes as an African American male in today's society. They also shared their successes, including stories of resilience, perseverance, and hard work. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have noted, humans are storytelling organisms who individually and collectively lead storied lives.

The participants' narratives of their experiences are critically important to the larger body of literature, given the absence of voices for African American male adult

learners' voices four-year universities, though the literature does reflect adult learner students' experiences at two-year colleges. Scholars like Woods and Williams (2013) have examined nontraditional African American male students' persistence and academic success from a community college lens. Even more, with the surge of adult learners attending college today, additional studies and scholarly research have produced more information around various aspects of adult learners. According to Goings (2016), scholars have focused on adult learners, but there has been limited research on nontraditional Black male undergraduates (Goings, 2015a).

The conceptual framework for this study was derived from two distinct concepts among higher education researchers since they both represent a segment of the population being examined, including adult learners and African American males. The first concept examines barriers to adult learners' participation in learning and includes dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers (Cross, 1981). According to Cross (1981), dispositional barriers are "those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (p. 98) Cross (1981) noted that these barriers are often overlooked because "it is far more acceptable to say that one is too busy to participate in learning, is too old, or lacks ability" (pp. 106-107). Dispositional barriers look specifically at lack of academic confidence or energy to pursue a postsecondary degree. Institutional barriers are grouped into five segments, including scheduling problems; problems with location or transportation; lack of courses that are interesting, practical, or relevant; procedural problems and time requirements; and lack of information about programs or processes (Cross, 1981). Lastly, situational barriers include but are not limited to childcare issues,

lack of time, transportation issues, and cost of education (Cross, 1981). Among the three barriers, adult learners most commonly cite situational barriers when discussing participation challenges in education (Cross, 1981).

Persistence factors toward learning was the second distinct concept included in the conceptual framework for this study. Woods and Williams (2013) conducted a study to examine factors involved in African American males' persistence toward learning in community college, including background (variables that occur before enrollment to college), academic (time spent studying and number of credits), environmental (life circumstances outside the institution), institutional (positive campus climate and faculty-student interactions), and psychological (satisfaction with the college experience and commitment to academic goals). Both concepts identify key factors related to adult learners generally and African American male adult learners specifically. Furthermore, both Cross's (1981) and Wood and Williams' (2013) studies captured a segment of the population. As a result, I sought to examine the voices and narratives of African American male adult learners' experiences attending a four-year institution.

Despite the limited research on African American males as adult learners, significant research has been conducted on the attrition of adult learners. In one of the first studies focused on nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized factors impacting attrition, including background variables, educational goals, high school academic performance, ethnicity, gender, parents' education, environmental variables, and social integration. These scholars postulated that student background variables could impact the adult learner's decision to drop out or have an indirect

influence on academic and environmental variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This study was useful in providing historical context for adult learners and variables impacting their persistence. Cross (1981) examined similar variables, including situational, institutional, and dispositional. Both studies provided insight into the variables adult learners consistently face.

In scouring the literature on African American males closer to the nontraditional population, I found many studies centered on African American nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges. According to Bush (2004), African American males often attend community college with the understanding that it will lead to economic and social advancement. Additionally, African American males believe community college offers the only opportunity for them to earn a postsecondary degree (Bush & Bush, 2004, 2005). Participants in the present study also found community college to be a great first option in their educational journey, as four of the six participants attended and graduated from a community college before transferring to a four-year university. Despite these general assertions for selecting community colleges, few empirical studies have been conducted to determine why African American males select community colleges over four-year institutions (Wood & Harrison, 2014).

This study utilized a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design to capture the experiences of African American male adult learner participants. According to Riessman (2008), narrative inquiry is a design for the humanities that enables the researcher to study individuals' lives and ask other individuals to provide stories about their lives. The following five themes have been generated based on the data collected

from the interviews: (1) early educational experiences; (2) pathways: pursuing an education through community colleges and prison; (3) persistence factors: family, faith, and motivation; (4) environmental challenges for African American male adult learners; and (5) "I can only be me" (double consciousness). The participants also discussed the significance of double consciousness to their educational experiences. Based on the information that was gleaned from the interviews, several key findings were discovered.

Description of Themes

This research study involved listening to the lived experiences of African American male adult learners currently enrolled in a four-year college. After the data were transcribed and coded, the themes described below were identified.

Theme 1: Early educational experiences. All the participants shared in detail their childhood educational experiences and the critical role they played in their educational journeys. The theme of early educational experiences references their childhood educational experiences in secondary school from kindergarten through high school, as well as personal experiences that had lasting impact. Sam shared his early educational experiences and how much he enjoyed learning. At an early age, Sam was a strong reader who was asked to assist his classmates:

> "I really loved school. I always did well. I've never gotten anything less than an A growing up in school. A lot of times my teachers used to ask me to help other students with school because I would finish my work so quickly, and they would just basically ask me for help.

Carlos was also a strong student who enjoyed school and always received good grades. He consistently read above his grade level, so by the fifth grade he had moved to another reading level with kids older than him, and he started getting teased because he was younger than the students with whom he attended class. Additionally, he was placed in the gifted and talented programs. However, he did not perform well in these classes:

> "Stuff like gifted and talented, I wasn't really motivated to do, and I guess I wasn't ready to embrace what other people saw in me. I was just really being myself, worrying about having fun and being with other kids. When you are placed in programs like these, you are isolated, but the pool of kids is limited and you might not have things in common with them and so forth. So, I subconsciously rebelled against that, and I did get in trouble a little bit. And then at one point, when we moved again, they wanted to label me as ADHD. I am getting in trouble, and now I feel like I'm behind, so I went from a school where they are saying, 'You're actually probably smarter than other kids around,' to a school where it's like I am misunderstood and I am academically behind my peers."

According to Mark, he had a unique educational experience because he moved around often, since his dad was in the military. He also had an opportunity to attend preschool where his mother worked as a secretary. Mark enjoyed school:

> "My elementary school, I remember I went to a Head Start. I remember before elementary school, I went to a Head Start that was unique. My mom worked there; she was the secretary. It was super unique and friendly, and then I went to

elementary school. Because I went to maybe about two different elementary schools and moving around, I found myself just walking up to people like, 'What is your name and what do you like to do?' That was a very playful, fun environment for me. I remember one of my teachers, and I think she was my fifth-grade teacher. She was so helpful in math because I was horrible at my math times tables and she used to get mad at me because she was like, 'Is just all you have to do is this.' She was a very good teacher, a very unique person. In reflecting back now, I mean, I have always been taught by good teachers. I just remember having very few options for Black teachers."

Wesley also shared his early educational experiences and emphasized the importance of doing his best because of parental expectations:

"It was important in my very early years for me to do my very best in school. My parents expected me to do well and I didn't want to let them down. Doing well was very easy for me. I tell you at one point, I think I was in the third grade or so, they sent me to the school psychologist. I didn't know it was a psychologist at the time, I knew they sent me to talk to a lady. And she finished with me, she told my parents and teachers she realized I was just bored because I was going over material that I'd done before. Teachers gave me extra work to do and I was good after that meeting. School was mostly easy for me early until I got to the sixth grade. After my parents divorced, I began having some challenges but I didn't ask for help. This happened mainly in math, where I was excelling

previously. I still place some blame on the teacher, as I was the only Black child in the sixth grade at the time and she treated me differently."

The experiences participants detailed helped shape their ideas and passion for learning. Each participant discussed the enjoyment learning brought to their childhood and the academic success and confidence they gained during that time. From reading to math, these students found an environment where they could thrive.

Theme 2: Pathways – Pursuing education through community college and prison. Each participant in this study had pursued secondary education prior to arriving at Southern Bridge University. This theme refers to the two different pathways taken by the participants to earn postsecondary credits. Four of the six participants attended and completed their associate's degree at a community college prior to enrolling at their current institution. For Carlos, Tyrone, Wesley, and Mark, community college was their first step toward a college education that provided them with hope and confidence. According to these participants, the decision to attend community college was based primarily on the cost of tuition. Carlos stated, "I could afford tuition at community college, and since I paid a lot of money for pilot school the first year, I wanted to save some money." Wesley shared, "Community college was a great start since I was out of school for 25 years before I decided to go back. It gave me the confidence I needed in myself to believe that college was possible."

For Tyrone, community college was a great option after he was released from prison and was able to get sober:

> "Community college was a great experience because the professors were so supportive and the cost was much lower than a four-year school like this one. I needed this type of support since I was just released from prison and recovering from drug addiction. I wanted to go there first so I could gain confidence in my skills and abilities before making the jump to such a large and well-known university like this one."

For these participants, community college was the best choice for starting their educational journey. The main reason they selected a community college as their entrance to higher education was tuition cost. As they continued, they found a supportive community that boosted their confidence as adult learners returning to school. Institutions like community colleges identify as open access because they have built their services around an open-enrollment standard. As a result, many of the students attending open-access institutions are nontraditional learners with families, jobs, and life responsibilities. According to Smith and Vellani (1999), open-access institutions in urban areas enroll large numbers of minority students.

Strayhorn (2012b) echoed Black men's selection of community college, stating that half of Black male students who complete high school and attempt higher education begin at a two-year public community college, although many Black male high school graduates never attempt higher education. It is also important to note that open-access institutions serve as gateways to higher education for students of diverse backgrounds. Thus, these four participants found support and gained confidence while working and ultimately earning their degree.

For Sam and David, earning a college degree seemed impossible because of their life circumstances and respective prison sentences of ten and 20 years. However, an opportunity arose for both participants to earn college credits while incarcerated. The unlikely pairing between prison and educational institutions served these participants more than an education; it provided them with an opportunity to focus on something other than their current situation and reignite their passion for learning. Both participants received their associate's degree while incarcerated.

Sam found himself incarcerated and serving a 20-year prison sentence at the age of 24. Given the length of his sentence, Sam returned to education while incarcerated and received his GED and associate's degree. He reflected on his time in prison this way:

> "I started college in prison, unlike most people, and I want to say in the beginning, maybe it was something to do to pass time, but also to see how I would fare on a college level because I got my GED while in prison. I also used to read a lot, and so when the college opportunity in prison came about, I took advantage of it. I was handpicked by the prison guards to participate. I was one of the first groups of cohorts that was able to take college-level courses while in prison and it was an amazing opportunity. Honestly, something for me I never thought about – I never thought about college. Where I come from, like I said, first-generation college students. Parents, grandparents, everybody are sharecroppers. Nobody went to school, so I never thought about school. So, when I heard of the opportunity, I was very excited about doing it and just seeing how I would fare."

David also decided to take advantage of educational opportunities in prison. He was selected to participate in a prison-to-higher-education program, which allowed him to earn roughly 90 credits while being incarcerated. While in prison, David served as a teacher's aide and had the opportunity to teach GED classes. He enjoyed helping others learn:

> "I enjoyed learning from the different professors while I was in jail. I also enjoyed teaching other inmates through the GED classes. Although I was in prison, I was learning so many things about myself I didn't know, like I enjoyed teaching. This program allowed me to learn and grow and I was so happy for the opportunity. While in prison, I made the decision to continue my education and continue advocating for the men I was locked up with. I just want us all to have opportunities to be a part of society again."

The prison-education partnership that allowed Sam and David these opportunities is a multi-foundation program that has partnered with nine colleges and universities in the state, as well as the state corrections department and parole board. This program sends volunteer and adjunct professors to various prisons in the state to provide higher education courses for inmates in state custody. It affords incarcerated men and women an opportunity to earn an associate's degree while being locked up. Once the students are released, the program assists in their transition to college life and funds their remaining education with a partnership institution. Sam and David shared their experiences with this program and the positive impact it has had on their lives.

Programs like this one give current inmates a chance to receive an education while incarcerated and continue with their educational pursuits upon release. Once they return to society, this program serves as a great support network for them on college campuses. Sam and David have since graduated from the university and are also graduates of this program.

Theme 3: Persistence factors – Family, faith, and motivation. These participants' persistence toward a goal despite difficulty or opposition was captured in the discussions. All participants shared various reasons for their drive and persistence toward their college degree. The three most common persistence factors included family support, including spouses and children, personal faith and belief systems, and overall personal motivation to succeed. Each of these persistence factors is captured below.

Family support. Family served as a key persistence factor for participants in this study. Family support was defined as the unwavering support of spouses, children, and extended family. Many of the participants were motivated to persist by their children and wives. David shared, "I am motivated by my daughters to earn this degree, but more important by the prisoners I can assist." David also stated that his wife of 20 years and four daughters served as a great sense of support for him while pursuing his degree. Wesley shared that his wife and son have served as his greatest source of inspiration and support. Even more, Wesley said he wanted to "make a commitment to be the man that was going to set the right example for my son all along the way." Tyrone shared similar sentiments about his wife and children, as well as his late sister. His wife and children continue to be a source of inspiration for him that keeps him going. Carlos shared that his

wife, parents, and extended family are a great support. He stated, “Their support is everything. My wife has always believed in me and my parents have always wanted me to go out and be the best I can be.”

Sam shared that although he was incarcerated and did not get to be physically with his children, they still looked to him to guide them:

> “I had to be an example they could follow despite my poor choices earlier in life. They cheered me on, telling me to go to college and get a degree. I had to continue for me, but more importantly for them. It’ll give them something to push them and motivate them to go to school, as well.”

Thus, family support served as one of the major contributors for all six participants. In addition, Sam shared, “I am a motivated person to do anything I set out to do. My children also serve as great sources of inspiration.” Participant Corey shared, “That’s what really motivated me, me pushing myself.” Mark shared, “The only person that’s going to be in your way is you.” Participant Troy also shared, “My children and my wife are my greatest motivation.” Participant Troy also shared he was motivated by his personal medical circumstances and the push to be better and stronger: “Regardless of my diagnosis, I am going to succeed.” Sam also mentioned being motivated by fellow inmates, stating,

> “One thing that really motivates me that a lot of people may not think or say about is the individuals I left behind in prison. You know, I want to set a good example and show people that I am doing well, but I am not the only person, and basically show other people that there’s many more behind who may come out of prison,

may never come out of prison, and some of them are intellectual geniuses. Again, their circumstances don't determine or make them who they are."

Persistence factors that positively impact adult learners included family support and intrinsic motivation. To this end, the findings from Flowers' (2012) study indicated the important role of family as a major resource for students. For African American males attending an HBCU or a community college, family support is critical to persistence and ultimate graduation. Cuyjet (2006) and Hampton (2002) echoed the important role of family as a key source of support for African American men in college.

***Importance of faith*.** The role of faith in these participants' lives was defined as the spiritual foundation that served as a guiding force and light in their lives, especially during difficult times. Sam, Wesley, Carlos, and Tyrone echoed the important role of faith in their lives. All four participants indicated that their strength and conviction in life comes from a foundation and relationship with God. Tyrone shared that his wife and God helped him get clean and sober from drug addiction. More specifically, he stated,

> "Definitely my church, my pastor, wife, and the reverend. I look around my community and see people walking around like zombies. I think about what God brought me from, brought me through, and now I am in college working on a degree. I don't want to go back to that. So, encourage them to go to church and find God."

Similarly, Wesley shared, "As a Christian man, my faith guides me and serves as the foundation for my life. I am who I am because of my faith." Sam shared,

> "My religion has helped me a lot. Being able to just reflect, or pray, and then when I might feel like things are difficult, I have a lot on my plate, but then I might go and pray and when I come back from praying I am just grateful for the opportunities to have the struggles that I had in my life. And then I am like, 'Okay, it's not as bad,' and you go about and do what you need to do."
>
> All but two participants echoed that faith and religion was a key factor in their success.

Historically, religion has traditionally served as a critical component of African American culture, dating back to slavery (Clark, Huang, Roth, Schultz, Williams, & Holt, 2017). This connection to religion has served as a strong foundation and compass guiding many African Americans' lives. In Rosser-Mims et al.'s (2014) study, participants identified sources of support that had positively impacted their academics, including family support and personal religious and/or spiritual beliefs. Ellison and Levin (1981) echoed this idea, stating that religion is associated with various social and health benefits, including improved physical health and mental clarity.

***Motivation through upward mobility*.** It was also evident during the interviews that each and every participant was motivated by career and upward mobility. All six participants shared a similar reason for pursuing a college degree, including creating better career opportunities and professional upward mobility. Mark shared, "A degree will open more doors and allow me to actually qualify for the jobs I am applying to," while Wesley shared, "A degree will allow me to better support my wife and son." Similarly, Troy shared, "With my degree I want to go out and hopefully one day have a

home practice and work with troubled youth, where I can connect with them and their families to talk about learned behavior and just make a difference." David shared, "I want to use my degree as a platform to attend law school. I want to be an advocate and a voice for those incarcerated." Again, these comments echo the career-driven reasons for pursuing a college degree.

Adult learners are motivated to pursue a college degree with a focus on career advancement or upward mobility. According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), adult learners pursue college degrees to advance their professional standing or transition into a new career. Additionally, Cross (1981) noted that adult learners pursue college degrees based on changes in the workforce and life changes, such as loss of a spouse, a major life transition such as marriage, career changes, and retirement.

Theme 4: Environmental challenges for African American male adult learners. The theme of environmental challenges was derived from various obstacles participants details as they related to their environment. For the purpose of this study, the term *environment* was defined using Woods and Williams' (2013) definition as life circumstances external to the institution. Additionally, the term *barriers* were used to describe some of these challenges and using Cross's (1981) understanding of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Both barriers and environment played key roles in the overall challenges participants faced.

Situational barriers include lack of time, cost of education, and other situational issues, while dispositional barriers include beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions of oneself and institutional barriers can include scheduling problems; problems with

location or transportation; lack of courses that are interesting, practical, or relevant; time requirements; and lack of information about programs or processes (Cross, 1981). This study identified three situational barriers, including technology access, time, and finances.

Time was a situational barrier identified by all six participants and highlighted in the data. Participants said that the time they needed to complete assignments, research materials, and read was extremely limited when factoring in work and other outside obligations. Participant Sam, who was living in a halfway house, had serious time constraints since he could only complete his assignments when he was on campus because he did not have access to a computer outside of school. Wesley, Carlos, and Mark had limited time because of their full-time work schedules. They were unable to take too many courses because they had to work a certain number of hours each week to support their families.

Technology skills and access were also identified as a situational barrier that presented major challenges for all participants, but especially Sam and David. Sam's living situation was unique because after his release, he was required to live in a halfway house occupied by many former inmates and without accessible computers. In addition to not having technology access at home, Sam also struggled with computer usage. While incarcerated, he did not take advantage of technology courses, so he struggled to navigate computers when he was released. Sam's limited technology access adversely impacted him in one course for which he earned a B instead of an A because he could not complete his assignments over the weekend. Although he shared his living situation with his

professor, the professor explained to Sam that it was his responsibility to complete the work.

Although David and Wesley did not have the same living circumstances as Sam, they both lacked skills to navigate the computers. David rarely used computers while he was incarcerated, so he had difficulty using one when he was released from prison. This situation was similar for Wesley, who he did not have to use computers at work. All three participants lacked exposure to technology and as a result struggled in the beginning with navigating it. More specifically, they shared their struggles with Microsoft Word and Canvas, the online learning management system for courses at Southern Bridge.

Another situational barrier participants identified was finances. The cost of tuition along with the cost of books, computers, and other supplies presented a challenge for participants. Although four of the six participants received some form of scholarship or financial aid, being able to support their families was still an issue. Wesley and Carlos both stated that working full-time and paying for classes out of pocket is very expensive. They both expressed the desire to go to school full-time, but they had concerns about trying to pay for a full course load and their monthly bills. At the time of this study, both were exploring whether tuition remission was an option through their employers. Additionally, Mark, who was unemployed at the time of the study, shared his concerns about trying to pay for his education out of pocket with a limited support system.

Rosser-Mims et al.'s (2014) research study examined the reentry of African American male adult learners to college. Their findings indicated several barriers to reentry, including financial resources and the struggle of paying for college, a lack of role

models in their lives, and the uncertainty of handling work-life balance. Although these students were attempting to return to college, the barriers they encountered were reflective of the challenges African American male adult learners enrolled in college experience.

As adult learners, the participants experienced environmental challenges in life outside of college. Some of these challenges occurred during childhood and continued to persist into adulthood. According to Sam, the environment in which he grew up served as an early factor and was his reason for dropping out of school. As a child, he enjoyed school and attended his local public schools. He performed well in secondary school and had an opportunity to attend a better school in another neighborhood that would push him as a student. Sam shared the negative impact of attending another school in a different neighborhood:

> "I was what people somewhat call a nerd when I was fairly young, but when I was around 12 years old, probably around 11 years old, I went to school outside of my neighborhood, and I was the only person in my neighborhood to go to that school, and I began getting bullied when I was very young by older guys that was about 14 because I was smart. And I wanted to escape that bullying. I started not going to school. So around 12 years old, I basically stopped going to school, started hanging in the streets, and I started hanging in stolen cars because that was a way to avoid truancy officers. So that was my introduction into criminality at the same time. Yeah, I loved school. I just had to stop going. I believe the furthest grade I completed was the eighth grade, I believe."

David also enjoyed school and performed well but had behavioral issues. He often acted out as a result of his parents' divorce and he described his mother as being extremely angry: "My mother took her anger out on me." During our conversation, David detailed an incident that had occurred in school regarding his anger and acting out.

> "So, I'll give you an example, kindergarten. I remember this clearly. The teacher was about to teach the class arts and crafts. She had us all come gather around this table. There was one chair left. And so, there was a girl and myself approaching the chair at the same time. And I stopped, and the girl pushed me down. I fell down on the floor, and she sat in the chair. And so, the teacher, instead of in my mind, now that I think back about that, I thought that she should have said to the girl not to push, right? Or at least, 'Get another chair.' So, she made me stand up, I guess because boys are supposed to be perceived as tough. So, she told me to get up and I felt in the moment she didn't defend me or say anything. I just knew it was wrong. So while she was teaching the people how to use the safety scissors for children and cutting pieces of yarn and giving it to the people, I got my scissors and I snuck up behind her and I cut her hair, the teacher."

As a result of his behavior, David was expelled from kindergarten. Both Sam and David described their experiences and the role environment played in those experiences. According to Rawlings (2015), the environments in which children grow up drastically shape their socioemotional health and development, while laying the foundation for future success. Boys and men of color suffer disproportionately in these areas (Rawlings, 2015). Often, they are confronted with negative societal perceptions, disparate treatment

within systems and institutions, damaging neighborhood environments, and family challenges. These childhood challenges can make adulthood difficult and adversely impact their ability to be successful. However, Sam and David did not allow those environmental variables to permanently alter their future success, as they have both earned a bachelor's degree despite the challenges they have encountered.

Theme 5: "I can only be me" – Double consciousness. According to Wright (2018), African American males attending college face a constant need to prove themselves as competent to succeed in the classroom. For participants in this study, the need and desire to prove their ability in the classroom and in the world was rooted in how they perceived themselves versus how the world perceived them. The concept of double consciousness, coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), served as a lens for them to discuss their experiences in higher education. The relevance of this concept is critical because a college community is a direct reflection of its outside local community (Wright, 2018). According to Du Bois (1993), "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (p. 8). Du Bois' statement aligns with many of the reasons Black male students attend college in the first place. For many African Americans, double consciousness has been critically important to establishing a balance between two worlds, one that reflects their inner qualities (African American) and one that reflects the outside world or society's demands (European American) (Alfred, 2001). According to Du Bois (1903), double consciousness is what distinguishes African Americans from other cultural groups.

Even more, the participants who had been incarcerated mentioned during the interviews feeling unworthy and less human because of their history and criminal records or addictions. These participants had a strong desire to prove something to their peers and themselves for personal enlightenment and development. *The Souls of Black Folk* strives to examine the nature of Black visibility through veiled constructs and explicit racism. Du Bois' (1903) words resonate with this statement: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (p. 6). All participants in this study reported experiencing these feelings at some point in their lives.

According to Vincent (1973), race plays a critical role in the development of double consciousness. If an individual begins to believe another person's definition of his history and who he is, then the believer becomes confined to a world with no self-identity, which is in complete contrast to an individual finding oneness. For the participants in this study, although double consciousness was prevalent throughout their journey, including into higher education, it did not adversely impact their persistence or determine their success as they worked toward their goal of earning a degree.

Du Bois' (1903) statement that "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self " (p. 8) aligns with many of the reasons African American male students decide to attend college. Based on Du Bois' (1903) comments, double consciousness is still prevalent today. Existing literature and this study's findings clearly illustrate how double consciousness holistically affects African Americans today. In

every aspect of their lives – inside the classroom, outside the classroom, in society at large, and throughout the world – the two-ness an African American male feels are invariably present.

Many of today's scholars (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Harper, 2009; Smith et al., 2007) utilize Du Bois' (1903) work as a guide to navigating solutions. Moving forward, it is critical for higher education practitioners and administrators to understand or be aware of this topic, which has been an issue for Black men since the early 1900s. To address this issue, higher education practitioners can create programming using the anti-deficit framework as a model and guide, which can assist students in moving past deficit thinking that serves as a barrier to persistence. Lastly, the research I conducted through interviews was a small sample of the African American male adult learner population. However, with more research, college and university stakeholders can develop an advanced competency on how to further support and assist African American male adult learners.

The challenges participants identified in this study reflect the ideas of double consciousness and how it can permeate an African American male's life from an early age. At some point in their educational journeys, all the participants had been confronted with looking at himself through others' eyes or measuring his soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. For example, three participants who were incarcerated during their adult lives identified feeling less human while in college. Mark reported his belief that the phenomenon was a common thread throughout his life:

"There is definitely a disconnect with how I see myself and the way the world sees me sometimes. Because I feel like they don't allow me to be my true self, but then at the same time, they're not ready for it, because I'm a stickler on oratory, professional oratory, so I speak differently."

Wesley shared similar thoughts around double consciousness and his educational journey:

"Some people, some of the professors, bring their own attitudes about Americans, about African Americans, others. Usually, though, because I've been good with academics even in that setting, I can see the difference as people get to know that I'm not a slacker. Perceptions may change a bit, attitudes change a bit, but approaches definitely change. In short, I think you get more respect once you've proven yourself. Not necessarily acceptance."

Sam shared his views on double consciousness and his reasons for wanting to pursue a degree to improve his outward perception and appearance:

"I mean, absolutely. And I read that book. It was a great book. You want to make people see you in a different light or a better light. But I'll even take it from a classroom perspective. Me being incarcerated, a criminal justice major, I had a young White student say to me, because I was doing so well in every class, As in every class, and giving discussions with the professor going back and forth on the material. And one day, we got our grades back for our exam and he said, 'How did you do?' And I said, 'I did alright.' And he's like, 'Well, what's your grade?' And I'm like, '90-something.' And he said to me, 'Of course you did. [Talking

about the double consciousness because then it was evident.] You know this stuff because that's what you lived.' Basically, 'You did well because you're a former criminal and you were in prison and you know about crime. So that's why you did well in a criminal justice class.' And to me, I thought that was a little slight. So, I said to him, I said, 'Well, yeah, but I'm kind of used to doing well in all my classes. It doesn't make a difference which classes I have, I get all As.' And I said that because I understood that he was an individual who was struggling. And I didn't want to be mean, but at that point it's like, 'Okay, let me explain to you that I don't just do well in criminology. I can do well in any facet of life. And your circumstance of having White skin, your circumstance of growing up with money, being educated and going to school 12 years straight, 15 years straight, does not make you any better than me in an academic setting.' And so, I always understood, even now, that I'm constantly being examined. Examined, so to say. When I come into a class, the first thing I let a professor know is my situation that I've been in prison and I spent the last 20 years of my life in prison."

Tyrone had a similar response from his professors regarding his past and connected this experience to his views of double consciousness:

"When I told my story about my life to my professor and how I spend time in prison and my addiction, I would think that they would look down on me, like, "Here we go, another one." But then, they didn't respond that way. They actually encouraged me, so I didn't feel the double standard in the way I originally thought I would. In the past, I have based my own ability to succeed on what others

perceived my ability to be, but I found out later that wasn't necessary. It was more about how I viewed and valued my own ability."

Carlos echoed similar comments around double consciousness and the ways it may have appeared throughout his educational journey:

> "I have always thought of myself in a positive light, believing I can accomplish anything. When my medical condition essentially stopped me from becoming the one thing I dreamed about my entire life, I was devastated. As I began to work these random jobs, I started to believe some of the perceptions society has about Black men and their success or lack thereof. I started to wonder if I would be a failure all of my life and not have a career. It wasn't until I started a job working with youth and then started to see my impact on them. Then I said, 'I need to go to school to make a larger impact and be an example instead of a statistic.'"

David also shared his feelings regarding the role of double consciousness:

> "So, I'm always dealing with this duality, how am I presenting myself? What is your perception of what you think you see, your perspective? So, in class sometimes, certain things that the textbook says or that the professors say in their presentations or their lectures, I challenge it, but in question form a lot. You understand? I challenge it so that not to put everybody in the same group, but the average person has not been in prison. They have a certain academic lens that they look through based on their experiences because they've never been directly impacted by the criminal justice system unless it was maybe their father who was a policeman and he got shot or injured.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) identifies double consciousness this way:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

According to Du Bois (1903), feeling less human than others and ignored by mainstream society reflects double consciousness. Two participants gave examples of encountering these feelings with university staff that left them feeling inadequate and less than human. Sam discussed the idea of earning a college degree so he could humanize himself given his criminal record. However, participants did not allow those instances to define their drive or motivation to earn a degree. According to Vincent (1973), race plays a critical role in the development of double consciousness. If an individual begins to believe another individual's definition of his history and who he is, then the believer becomes confined to a world with no self-identity, which is in complete contrast to an individual finding oneness.

For the participants, although double consciousness had been prevalent throughout their journey, including in higher education, it did not define their ability. Wright (2018) echoed the relevance of double consciousness in a study that surveyed students and administrators about the relevance of double consciousness in higher education. The findings indicated that double consciousness is apparent in campus and

racial communities and does not only exist at PWIs but is a holistic concept that impacts African American males inside and outside the classroom and in society (Wright, 2018).

Discussion of Findings

In this study, it was critical to understand participants' past experiences, as well as their academic and social experiences, because many of these experiences influenced their decisions earlier in life and ultimately influenced their decision to pursue a college degree. In addition, understanding early educational experiences and earlier college experiences provided insight into how participants experienced college as adult learners. For these six participants, college was not a new experience, as they had already earned an associate's degree or college credits. However, the transition to Southern Bridge University was new for all the participants. According to Goings (2018), understanding how Black men experience new college environments, as well as their family support systems, is important to their transition. One noted scholar, Schlossberg (1981, postulated that to better understand one's transition experience, one must know and understand his or her individual characteristics, which can include race, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and previous experiences with college transitions. This theoretical factor was important in understanding how being a male and African American impacted participants' experiences in college and their interactions with fellow students, faculty, and staff.

The intersection of the adult learner who identifies as an African American male contains a rich story filled with life experiences, failures, and success as college students. The six participants in this study identified factors that served as major influences in their

academic success, despite their first-generation college student status. To this end, first-generation college students have limited cultural and social capital that is necessary for success in higher education compared to their peers (Strayhorn, 2006). Despite their generation status and life circumstances, each participant identified an internal drive to succeed.

Although we know motivation cannot be seen, touched, or measured directly, there is a belief that a positive relationship exists between motivation and adult learning (Benseman, 2005; Brookfield, 1986; Brophy, 2004; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Wlodkowski, 1985, 1999, 2003, 2008). Wlodkowski (1999) explained, "If we match two people of identical ability and give them identical opportunity and conditions to achieve, the motivated person will surpass the unmotivated person in performance and outcome" (pp. 3-4). This statement mirrors the motivation of all six participants, who committed to attend college and earn a degree as adults despite the challenges of incarceration, limited finances, and medical issues. The motivation these participants detailed energized their behavior and provided a direction or purpose for their pursuit of a degree.

In addition to their internal drive and motivation, participants were encouraged and supported by their families, including spouses and children. The role and support of their families was one reason why they had not given up and continued to work hard toward their degree. They wanted their children to be proud of them, no matter their poor life choices or the time it has taken to earn a degree. According to Hensley and Kinser (2001), children serve as a source of motivation for adult learners to attend college and as

a reminder of the need to develop skills to place their family in a better financial place. Furthermore, according to Barnett (2004), families play a critical role in Black males' success by reducing stress and serving as an emotional support system.

Moreover, all participants in this study identified upward mobility as being directly connected to their reason for pursuing a college degree. The professional opportunities a college degree provides include career advancement in a current position or transition to a new position in a different industry. These participants want to be competitive in the current employment market and they understand the necessity of having a degree to serve as a credential. According to Carnevale et al. (2012), Go (2008), Kasworm (2003b), and Tikkanen (1998), the competition for jobs drives many adult learners to pursue a college degree and make every effort to improve their marketability, income standing, and career potential. It is important to note that adult learners who experience academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Ritt, 2008).

Faith and religion resonated for four of the six participants in this study, all of whom described in detail how their faith and spiritual connection has and continues to serve as a guiding force in their lives, driving them each and every day. Tyrone's faith pulled him out of addiction and continues to guide his sobriety. According to Tyrone, he is able to focus and be successful in college because of his faith and religious beliefs. These participants identified with religious tenets, as religion is about an organized community of faith with an official creed that guides behavior. The two non-religious

participants identified more with the contemporary idea of spirituality. According to Tisdell (2008), spirituality is about an individual's personal experience, which can be experienced anywhere. For Mark and David, spirituality was about their personal journeys and experiences toward wholeness, while Sam, Tyrone, Wesley, and Carlos identified with religion as an organized community of faith. Spirituality provided a sense of purpose for participants and strengthened the support they received from religious institutions. Regardless of whether the connection was religious or spiritual, however, both served as a factor that contributed to participants' success in college and life.

All the participants had been confronted with challenges as they worked toward their degrees. Some of these challenges have already been captured in current literature mentioned in Chapter 2, including time constraints; access to technology and limited technical skills needed to navigate it; and finances, such as the cost of tuition and supporting their families. Participants' challenges with time and finances fall into the category of situational barriers adult learners experience. According to Cross (1981), situational barriers are situations arising in life at any given time and can include lack of family support, financial challenges, and transportation. Participants in this study identified supportive campus environments as a positive factor that impacted their academic success. Five of the six participants stated that faculty and staff support on campus, including offices like Disability Services and faculty support in and out of the classroom, was critical to their success. These experiences also contributed to their persistence and positive campus experience.

The role of double consciousness was threaded throughout participants' lived experiences. It is critical for higher education professionals to acknowledge and address double consciousness because it is prevalent outside local communities that also mirror college campus communities. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), multiple interviews identified multiple perspectives related to race inside and outside the classroom. To this end, Bonilla-Silva (2010) affirmed what Black people may think when they experience double consciousness: Race problems experienced 100 years ago never left. Thus, the study contributes to the current relevance of this topic.

Even more, double consciousness creates an unspoken standard or balancing act among African American males in terms of how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves (Wright, 2018). As a result, invisible boundaries are created for an individual to navigate through society. For this study's participants, these invisible boundaries existed early in life and played out negatively or positively through their lived experiences. As these participants grew in age and understanding their identity, they were able to reconcile their two-ness and how they assess themselves through the eyes of others. This two-ness reconciliation yielded a positive understanding of self with a true understanding of who they are and what they can accomplish, regardless of obstacles or circumstances.

Participants' narratives explored numerous life experiences that served as catalysts in their educational journey. To this end, these men's life experiences prepared them for the rigors of college and the classroom. According to Newman and Peile (2002), experience is at the core of adult learning, both through the lens of personal ownership

when a student has a plethora of experience and the lens of learning when students have to experience a phenomenon to understand what it truly means.

Conclusion

Sam, David, Carlos, Tyrone, Wesley, and Mark are six African American male adult learners who participated in this study. All six participants are from various parts of the United States, are first-generation college students, and are now affiliated with a common institution of higher education. Sam and David were in their final semester during the data-collection period and have recently graduated. The remaining four participants were in their junior year of school at the time of this study. The participants represented a range of majors, including criminal justice, urban studies, psychology, and social work. All participants identified as first-generation college students, and four of the six participants were parents to one or more children.

The participants had multiple responsibilities outside the classroom, with everyone working full- or part-time except for Tyrone, who is disabled, and Mark, who was looking for employment at the time of the interview. Additionally, all participants had experienced various life circumstances that shaped their current mindset and outlook on higher education, including incarceration, medical conditions, and family issues. Among many others, these factors played a role in shaping the participants as students and their navigation of higher education. The participants shared their narratives, which included detailed information about their backgrounds, early educational experiences, reasons for attending college, success in college, barriers, and educational experiences viewed through a double consciousness lens.

The intent of this chapter was to shed light on the themes derived from the study. These themes provided insight into the experiences of African American male adult learners enrolled at a four-year public research institution. It also examined the persistence factors impacting this student population, while shedding light on specific individuals' educational experiences and double consciousness. Based on the results of this study, African American male adult learners have encountered persistent barriers and found ways to move forward and continue to work toward their educational goals.

Chapter 6

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

> A system of education is not one thing, nor does it have a single definite object, nor is it a mere matter of schools. Education is that whole system of human training within and without the schoolhouse walls, which molds and develops men.
>
> —W. E. B. Du Bois

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand and tell the stories of African American male adult learners. My goal in gleaning accounts of adult learners' college experiences was to give a voice to a population of students missing from the educational literature. This study identified five major themes that developed from the research: (1) early educational experiences; (2) pathways: pursuing an education through community colleges and prison; (3) persistence factors: family, faith, and motivation; (4) environmental challenges for African American male adult learners; and (5) "I can only be me" (double consciousness). The results indicate that all six participants had positive college experiences despite various life challenges encountered along the way.

The objective of this qualitative study was to provide an opportunity for African American male adult learners to articulate their experiences at a four-year urban research institution and discuss double consciousness. The goal of the study was to give voice to men who offered their perspectives on their lived experiences as college students. The literature suggests the plight of the African American male adult learner in education and society is comparable to salmon racing upstream against a current, despite the life-

threatening hurdles and predators (Guy, 2014). This metaphor can be applied to how researchers have traditionally examined African American males' experiences in adult education (Goings, 2017).

For the participants in this study, the obstacles included an extensive incarceration period, drug addiction, self-doubt, and racial discrimination. Despite those challenges, they found the motivation to move forward and persist toward their degree.

More specifically, double consciousness played a significant role throughout the participants' lives. The participants experienced internal conflict from an oppressive society and had to reconcile their two-ness. For example, Sam mentioned that his criminal record, spending 20 years in prison, and making poor choices in life had hindered his position in society. He stated, "Earning a college degree would humanize me in the eyes of others." This statement represents Sam making every attempt to reconcile how he sees himself with how society views him. Similarly, Carlos, Wesley, and David mentioned their efforts to demonstrate how they did not fit into a stereotype based on a particular wardrobe, language, and behavior. Each of these participants strived for more than one social identity. The findings from the study serve as a starting point for educational researchers to begin examining this forgotten but critically important student population.

One of the themes all participants identified was the pure motivation to succeed. According to Rothes, Lemos, and Gonçalves (2017), adult learners' motivation is very different from that of traditionally aged students. Adult learners often enroll in college voluntarily as part-time students and usually juggle life responsibilities like work and

family, which places them at a greater risk of dropping out of school (McGivney, 2004). Comparative research studies have shown that nontraditional students possess a higher level of intrinsic motivation and are more mastery-oriented than traditional students ((Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999. This study highlighted six participants' intrinsic motivation as they managed various responsibilities but continued to remain focused on their educational goals.

Additional studies have also indicated adult learners' high level of self-efficacy and overall engagement in work (Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, & Deng, 2006; Harkins, 2009). Participants' motivation, demonstrated as a theme in this study, is comparable to empirical results regarding adult learners' motivation and the connection with foundational adult education models similar to andragogy and self-directed learning, which considers adult learners to be more self-directed and purposeful learners who are driven internally rather than externally (Knowles, 1980). These six participants demonstrated an abundance of intrinsic motivation given some of their personal circumstances that could have served as a deterrent.

Addressing the Research Findings

The following section describes the research questions that guided this study and responses gleaned from data collection.

RQ1: How do African American male adult learners at a four-year research institution describe their experience?

The participants shared their overall experiences in higher education, including both positive experiences and challenges. David and Sam identified supportive university

staff and their willingness to assist students regardless of their background. Both participants also mentioned the faculty's supportive nature and desire to assist students in reaching their academic goals. Carlos echoed these sentiments and identified the support services, specifically the Office of Disability Services, and their willingness to assist students. In discussing support, Sam stated that he did not have to ask for help, but that he had to tell people to stop helping and let them know he was okay and did not need anything. Further, Sam and David both mentioned their positive experiences related to socializing themselves back into society in a productive and profound way as opposed to embracing negativity or phenomena that could be detrimental to their success.

Wesley and Tyrone also found their overall experiences in higher education to be positive and supportive as they worked toward their goal of earning a college degree. However, Mark had some negative views of his experiences, given some of the challenges with his major in urban studies and the lack of resources, specifically the availability of full-time faculty in the program.

RQ2: What environmental factors do African American male adult learners feel have shaped their academic success or non-academic success in college?

Participants identified various environmental factors that played a significant role in their academic success or also served as barriers. For David, living in a decent neighborhood has contributed to his overall success, while Sam stated his environment cultivated negative influences from an early age, adversely impacting his academics from the time he was an adolescent to being incarcerated for 20 years. After being released from prison to a halfway house, Sam was placed in another negative environment, but he

was not the same and his perception of what he could accomplish shifted. This positive shift was a direct reflection of his excellent academic performance. Wesley mentioned the importance of having role models and good examples of African American men doing something positive and making an impact. For all participants, family served as a positive environmental factor and a top reason why many attended college and continued to matriculate each year.

Challenges confronted by African American male adult learners were identified as situational barriers and included finances, limited free time, and technology access and skills. The cost of tuition, along with books, computers, and other supplies, presented a challenge for all participants and at some point, had adversely impacted their academic success. As an adult learner, lack of free time to complete assignments due to work or other obligations served as a consistent barrier. Another situational barrier participants identified included technology skills and consistent access to computers to complete assignments. David and Sam mentioned the challenges of learning how to use a computer to complete assignments. Sam also mentioned the lack of access to technology due to his living situation and the challenges it presented while pursuing his degree.

RQ3: How does the double consciousness framework help to explain or make sense of the narrative of the African American male adult learner?

The prevalence of double consciousness permeated the discussion surrounding participants' childhood experiences up to the present day. Each participant identified the challenges of being an African American male in society. According to Haymes (2005), African American men in the lower talented tenth are confused about European

Americans' role in which they operate. All participants mentioned this idea, and Sam discussed the idea that getting a college degree would make him more human in others' eyes, given his criminal background. Moreover, Sam and David hesitated to share with professors and classmates their background for fear of judgement and that they would be seen in a particular way. However, fear did not stop either participant from persevering and moving forward, connecting with the third sense of double consciousness, which Du Bois (1903) defined as

> the merging of [an African American's] double self into a better and truer self. This is a "true self-consciousness" that enables African American forms of life to carry their message or cultural contribution to the world. This is to say, it enables African Americans to take part in the project of civilization. (Haymes, 2005, p. 285)

Despite many negative experiences inside and outside the classroom rooted in perception of self -perception versus outward perception and the long term impact these experiences had on participants' personal beliefs of their own ability to succeed in life and education, all six participants persevered. They moved away from the thinking of the lower talented tenth, living day to day and losing foresight of great things to come. Regardless of the losses and challenges, they stayed committed to their goals and continued on to the third sense of double consciousness. All the participants echoed the concept of double consciousness as a common thread throughout life but found an ability to push through as they grew in life and abilities.

Conceptual Framework Reflection

The conceptual framework for this study was derived from two distinct concepts in higher education, which included adult learners and the dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers affecting their persistence (Cross, 1981), as well as persistence factors for nontraditional African American males (Woods & Williams, 2013). Both concepts showed the relationship between African American males and adult learners, and they both emphasized the factors and traits that promote adult learners' and African American males' persistence in higher education.

To this end, the data derived from the study identified three situational barriers, including technology access, time, and finances. Cross (1981) identified similar situational barriers, thus affirming the general barriers adult learners face when pursuing a degree. In addition, Rosser-Mims et al.'s (2014) study found that once African American male adult learners reenter or return to higher education, they experience financial barriers. All six participants in this study experienced financial challenges, as they all mentioned cost and not being responsible for the enormity of student loan debt.

Participants' lived experience narratives were discovered in this study through narrative inquiry. The process of narrative inquiry allowed me to gain insight into the identity of this student population missing from current literature. In examining the environmental factors identified by Woods and Williams (2013), the participants identified closely with environmental variables, including the pull of life circumstances like incarceration, addiction, poverty, and racial discrimination. To this end, environmental variables have also been examined, and according to Bean and Metzner

(1985) and Freeman and Huggans (2009), the environmental variable was referred to as the environmental pull, which is made up of life circumstances external to the institution that can impact students' overall success. Although environmental variables had an adverse impact on participants in this study, it did not stop their drive and motivation to earn a college degree. Thus, their persistence at the institution was not negatively impacted.

The psychological factors Woods and Williams (2013) identified was also connected to major findings of this study, included participants' strong commitment to academic goals and dreams. For these participants, this commitment was positioned within the theme of internal drive to succeed. Each participant identified early on their reasons and motivation for earning a degree. These motivating factors served as the driving force for each of the participants to push forward and persist.

Reflections on Leadership

The participants in this study discussed how their environment from childhood to being incarcerated to acclimating to a college campus impacted their decisions, both positively and negatively, throughout their lives. For example, according to Sam,

> "My environment played the biggest part of me, even when I moved away. Right before I got locked up and sent away, I wanted to stop what I was doing. When I moved to North Carolina, I wasn't hanging with bad people and their influences and you didn't have to look or dress a certain way. However, as soon as I left and came back to the city, I got stuck and then went to prison."

Sam's environment had a lasting impact on his freedom as a young man, while Troy's environment introduced him to drugs and violence. Despite these barriers, participants found success in their journeys and continued to celebrate their resilience despite challenges and obstacles.

While the data collected in this study of African American male adult learners provides a baseline of information that is currently missing from the literature, the study has also resulted in more unanswered questions. The two prevailing questions are discussed in the concluding section that follows.

Although the literature is filled with studies on African American male students, most of them discuss traditionally aged students or students attending community college. The literature does not capture any experiences of African American males as adult learners enrolled in a traditional four-year institution. When one considers the evolution of education for Black Americans in particular and the overt racism and history of denied access to educational opportunities, the question is, are we only examining and collecting data on African American males enrolled at community colleges because of accessibility? Do we think these students' experiences in traditional four-year institutions are not important or relevant for the adult learner community to help practitioners support these students more effectively?

Even more, these students' lived experiences prior to arriving in college have numerous layers of life-altering consequences from which many students can learn. In some way, they have shaped these men and how they navigate a college campus and their lives. The following two fundamental questions resulted from this study:

1. To what extent and for what purpose do four-year institutions regularly examine nontraditional students by race and ethnicity?
2. If institutions are not collecting data about this population, why not?

As someone who works directly with traditional and nontraditional learners, I think the bigger concern is that virtually no attention is paid to the African American male adult learner's participation in a four-year institution. Numerous studies have concluded that African American males typically lag behind their White counterparts, both in terms of participation and success in higher education, but how does this information translate to adult learners? Are African American males attending four-year institutions more successful in a traditional campus setting than at a community college?

In posing these questions, I am reminded of Sam's observation that with the right support, no matter the choices one has made in the past, one can be successful: "I have found that support here with staff who understand and do not judge me for past mistakes, but are truly trying to help me become a better version of myself." Sam has found success despite all of life's barriers. According to Guy (2014), the plight of adult Black males in society and education is similar to salmon racing upstream against currents, rocks, and predators, trying to survive against the odds. Essentially, Guy's (2014) metaphor can be applied to higher education researchers' examination of African American male adult learners' experiences. The focus is usually placed on student deficits and not the success they find despite those obstacles. To obtain a better understanding of this student population, there must be more research conducted on African American male adult learners.

Limitations

It is necessary to examine, if only briefly, some limitations to this narrative inquiry. The research topic of African American male adult learners is limited in terms of prior research or relevant studies. Literature is a critical component of research, as it helps identify the range of work that has been done on a particular topic. In this instance, a foundation of literature was missing on the subject. Although a plethora of data has been published on adult learners, also known as nontraditional students, it has not specifically addressed the experiences of adult learners who are African American males. The intersection of these two groups and their experiences in a four-year university has not been published. The lack of literature on this population made it difficult for me to compare or utilize previously published data on this population. Even more, building a literature review was challenging with limited scholarly information directly reflecting the African American male as an adult learner. Thus, I had to explain both populations of students separately and identify similar challenges for each group.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size. This narrative inquiry only reflected the lived experiences of six African American male adult learners. Although significant relationships arose within the datasets derived from this study, a larger sample size may have generated a broader scope of results. The broader the datasets and participants, the stronger the possibility for data that represents a population. The themes and data findings could have been strengthened with a larger sample size.

The final limitation identified in this study was the data-collection process, which consisted of 60-minute audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with participants.

Although the data revealed strong relationships and themes, the collection of experiences only took place through one data process. To address this challenge, I should have considered adding a focus group to the data-collection process to strengthen the overall range of data collected on a population of students that is currently missing from the literature.

Future Research

Although this study provides a window into the experiences of African American male adult learners, there are several gaps in our general knowledge about African American male adult learners and would benefit from future research. Thus, I make the following recommendations:

1. An in-depth exploration of how African American male adult learners experience HBCUs, how their lived experiences appear, and if these adult learners feel connected to the university given the cultural connectivity.
2. A larger qualitative study on the experiences of African American male adult learners who are earning degrees through an online format, which is often self-directed.
3. The role of resilience in African American male adult learners' pursuit of a college degree. All the participants in this study possessed a level of resilience given the life circumstances and obstacles they encountered along the way. A study of this kind could capture the various levels of resilience displayed or needed to achieve a goal.

Implications for Higher Education

It is important that I follow up with dissemination plans to share this study's findings and recommendations with the leadership of Southern Bridge University, and more widely with practitioners in higher education. However, this study's potential impact on adult learners in higher education is equally important. The findings are liberating in terms of highlighting African American males in a positive light, given the life obstacles they have faced and their ability to persevere despite them. The findings illustrated participants' college experiences, beginning with childhood backgrounds and exploring further successful influences, barriers, environments, and the yearning to prove themselves in the classroom despite their self-perceptions and beliefs about their own abilities. There is also an opportunity to shift the narrative of Black males and highlight their life experiences and intellectual assets, as well as their great benefit to society as a whole.

According to Wells (2008), a college credential is the most impacting equalizer for persons in society. These researchers note that college degrees provide for higher socioeconomic status and enable individuals to move up the social ladder into a higher class. It is anticipated that the findings and subsequent recommendations that have emerged from this study will have important implications for creating long-term, sustainable social change in mainstreaming Black males into educational settings and propelling them toward greater educational attainment, higher wages, and highly skilled careers. This outcome is more promising than current statistics regarding unemployment, incarceration, and paths of blighted life experiences.

Creating opportunities for African American male adult learners to share their stories about experiences in the classroom and in life, as this study did, has no doubt strengthened participants' resolve and confidence to continue to develop intellectually and professionally. Their engagement in this research study was a true exercise in reflection about themselves, where they started, how they viewed education as youth, how they think critically about themselves as men, and how they have been able to find academic success. The findings indicate an opportunity for African American males who identify as adult learners to be highlighted within the higher education landscape and society for their intellectual assets and lived experiences.

Similarly, Goings' (2018) study of nontraditional Black male undergraduates' transition experiences shared the tremendous opportunity for colleges and universities to recruit nontraditional Black male undergraduates, as almost 70% of Black males have not completed college or gone back to school. As shared previously, nontraditional students make up the fastest growing population of students on college campuses today (Bonner et al., 2015). To this end, according to Rawlston-Wilson, Saavedra, & Chauhan, (2014), 65% of nontraditional students are identified by indicating financial independence as undergraduate students.

According to the research and Black males' low college graduation rates, many scholars have now started to focus on the reasons this population decides to leave college or make the case that there is a great deal to learn about how these students succeed academically, which can educate colleges and universities on how to support Black men (Goings, 2016, 2017a; Fries-Britt, 1997; Palmer et al., 2009). Thus, there are numerous

opportunities for colleges and universities to learn more about these students so they can better support their needs and success in college.

Recommendations for Action

The data collected in this study, coupled with findings derived from the data analysis, provide a sound foundation on which to make recommendations for action and further studies. The following initiatives are recommended to enhance the college experience for African American male adult learners and provide more opportunities for support based on their needs.

- Hold focus group sessions with African American male adult learners during their first weeks of school and on a scheduled periodic basis to validate, support, and continually encourage their intrinsic motivation and yearning to be successful in college.
- Formalize a program for nontraditional students that combines peer and faculty/staff mentors. The more accessible a mentor can be to students, the more opportunities they have to establish formal and informal relationships and connectedness with the institution.
- Use the stories gathered in this study as a basis for faculty and staff professional development and as a means of familiarizing personnel with African American male adult learners' perspectives, which may prompt staff to reflect upon students they have encountered in their classrooms and service areas and how they might have supported them in more intentional ways. This

research might also prove to stimulate additional interest and conversations among faculty and staff around innovative ways to support these students.

The recommendations delineated above are both practical and reasonable. They can be easily implemented at institutions if there is an institutional commitment to supporting adult learners, more specifically African American males. Aligned with my recommendations, I intend to disseminate an executive summary of my research, including my findings and recommendations, to the leadership of Southern Bridge University.

Conclusion

African American males are often victims of subtle stereotypes from teachers, peers, and the media when it relates to their academic abilities, overall behaviors, and life expectancies (Davis, 2003). These subtle stereotypes continue to arise as they grow into adulthood and eventually can translate into feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy, coupled with a perceived inability to be successful. The low expectations of academic success African American males encounter from their PreK-12 teachers follow them into college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Despite all these challenges, educational success is possible and this study highlights the lived experiences of six participants faced with academic challenges and life circumstances that could have derailed their plans, though they all found academic success.

This qualitative research study provided an opportunity for African American male adult learners to articulate and detail their experiences in higher education, which have not otherwise been captured in the current literature. More importantly, these

participants highlighted their successes in higher education and the lived experiences that impacted them as college students. From incarceration to drug addiction to racial challenges, these six participants were committed to their educational pursuits and persisted toward their goal. The intersection of African American males and adult learners was explored, while two concepts related to adult barriers and persistence factors for nontraditional African American male students were offered as a conceptual framework into the exploration of their experiences.

These students' experiences were collected and analyzed through interviews. The themes derived from the data showed that these adult learners were successful despite all of life's challenges and unrelenting obstacles. Themes such as early educational experiences and persistence factors including family, faith, and motivation to environmental challenges reflect the lived experiences of adults in all facets of their lives. These men were successful due to their internal drive and motivation to succeed, spiritual connections, and supportive family and campus environments. As practitioners, it is critically important for us to learn more about this student population and the many areas that may impact their persistence as college students. As the fastest growing population on college campuses today, adult learners, more specifically African American male adult learners, need to be examined. As an educational leader, I intend to use the recommendations for action outlined in the study to initiate further research and relevant practices to move the African American male adult learner undergraduate forward in higher education.

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